

# **Environmental Vocabularies**

*Environmental ethics from theory to practice*

**Jonas Risløw Iversen**



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*Centre for Development and the Environment*

*University of Oslo*

*Blindern, Norway*

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# Introduction

The notion of an environmental crisis has become a significant part of our political, scientific and public discourses. Its presence in media, literature, movies and conversation impacts our daily lives and generates worries, fears and debates. In short, the environmental crisis has become a central topic of conversation, and a central challenge for the wellbeing and prosperity of our societies. At the same time, the established knowledge on its human causes is growing, and offers considerable insights into the practical changes that could reduce natural degradation. Given the ubiquity of the issue and the knowledge of potential amendments, one could expect our societies to hasten towards significant improvements in order to ameliorate the ongoing environmental degradation. However, the development is going in the opposite direction. In spite of our increasing awareness of the dangers of rapid climatic changes, we seem unable or unwilling to change and adapt.

Philosophers have taken this to indicate that our ethical convictions are out of date, and consequently that the solution of this crisis requires us to establish a new ethic. The philosophical effort to *provide* such an environmental ethic has been going on for several decades, but appears to have had little influence on our shared ethical convictions. In short, this philosophical project does not appear to be working in practice. After four decades of environmental philosophy, it is time to try another perspective.

This thesis is an attempt to do so by abandoning the ideas of foundationalist environmental philosophy and substitute the perspective of Richard Rorty's anti-foundationalism. The question is not whether this is a sounder philosophical position than its alternatives, but whether Rorty's writings can offer a more useful perspective on our failure to respond to the environmental challenge.

The research questions of this thesis read:

*How can we approach environmental ethics without philosophical foundations?*

*What are the benefits of an anti-foundationalist conception of moral progress, and what kind of vocabularies does it promote?*

## **Environmental Ethics**

The emergence of the environment as a new matter of concern is reflected in a gradual environmental turn of the vocabularies – political, literary and philosophical – which deal with the ethical and normative aspects of our societies. Parallel to the increase of environmental knowledge and the development of an ecological perspective, the public discourse of the last decades has been increasingly centered on the divergence between our planet's capacity and our ways of living. Although the problem at hand is generally accepted, and concrete solutions problem are within reach, those solutions have not been widely employed. In spite of our comprehension of environmental degradation and of what can be done to ameliorate it, our efforts so far have been vastly insufficient.

Environmentally concerned writers have taken this observation to suggest that a solution to the environmental crisis requires that we change our cultures by revising our basic ethical convictions. The assumption behind this line of thought is that we would react stronger to the damage that threatens our planet if our ethical convictions were more in tune with it. In other words, the divergence between environmental knowledge and practical efforts is explained by the lack of *environmental values* in our cultures, values which could otherwise work as a bridge between our knowledge and the required efforts. A branch of environmental philosophers who adhere to this perspective address the problem at hand in ethical terms, and conceive of ethical problems as problems to be solved by philosophers. These philosophers perceive our value judgments and ethical convictions as expressions of a systematic ethic which can be replaced by *a new system*. As environmental philosophers, they commit themselves to *provide*



such a systematic ethic, and thereby to bring us closer to a solution to the environmental crisis. This is done through a replacement of the prevalent ethical system with a new, environmental ethic, backed up by philosophical arguments which are unbiased and free of speciesism. The attempt to provide an environmental ethic on the basis of philosophical arguments amounts to what I term *environmental foundationalism*.

The various proponents of environmental foundationalism share the idea that the complex debate about our environmental responsibility can be resolved if we distinguish *real* values from those that are advocated from different contingent perspectives. They treat morality and values as matters of *moral knowledge*, and place their own profession at the top of the epistemological hierarchy. In this perspective, moral progress is a matter of increasing moral knowledge through philosophical analysis. The aim of environmental foundationalism is to promote the solution of the environmental crisis by providing us with an ethical system which shortens the distance between environmental information and concrete action.

Philosophers who embrace this concept of philosophy and moral progress share the assumption that there is *one answer* to the question of value in nature. The acquisition of that answer is the common goal of these philosophers, and constitutes the *raison d'être* of environmental foundationalism. The challenge, however, is that the various philosophical analyses within this branch support *different* conclusions about the distribution of intrinsic value in nature, each position adding up to a particular “centrism” in contradiction to others. The diversity of positions within the discourse environmental foundationalism is at odds with the basic premise that there is one answer, one valid “centrism”, to be found. There is still a diversity of *perspectives* on what the *perspective free* environmental ethic should be. Perhaps as a result of this tension, the efforts of environmental foundationalists have been directed towards reaching agreement *within* their own discourse, rather than (or prior to) trying to communicate their insights to the public. However, such internal agreement has not emerged.

Without the unanimity which would give a new ethical system its philosophical justification, the discourse of environmental foundationalism seems to have stagnated.

The failure to reach internal agreement, and the consequent introspective focus of environmental foundationalism, has led proponents of *environmental pragmatism* to conclude that the basic assumptions of environmental foundationalism are flawed. These philosophers maintain that the problem for environmental foundationalism is the insistence on moral *monism* – the idea that value in nature must have one particular location. Accordingly, they propose a new perspective on environmental ethics based on moral *pluralism*. In this view, value in nature is spread across different kinds of entities, depending on the context and situation in which they arise and prevail. Furthermore, environmental pragmatism rejects the clear distinction, central to various versions of environmental foundationalism, between intrinsic value (an entity's value for its own sake) and instrumental value (an entity's value for the sake of something else). These philosophers introduce the notion of a basic *interconnectedness* of the world which, evident in our daily experience of the world, implies that all value is relational. According to this view, therefore, the value of an entity relates both to other entities and to the human being that experiences it. The environmental pragmatists construe value as a property of relations rather than of entities. This perspective, they argue, amounts to an environmental ethic, without subscribing to a particular “centrism”: if all value is relational, then our natural environment – itself a web of relations – has value whenever we value something related to it.

However, in spite of their efforts to resolve the stagnated and introspective condition of environmental ethics, it seems that their break with these tendencies is rather limited. Although they avoid the reduction of environmental value to the intrinsic value of *one* moral center, they fail to turn the philosophical discourse on the environment into a public contribution. Arguably, the similarities with foundationalism outnumber the differences. In fact, it seems that the significant difference between environmental pragmatism and environmental

foundationalism is the different philosophical principles which are applied, rather than the approach to ethical deliberation. In both cases, a philosophical system is used as a foundation for a certain conception of values in nature. It seems that the promise of a non-foundationalist perspective on environmental ethics was hard to keep. Environmental pragmatism may be a new perspective in the philosophy of environmental ethics, but as such, it appears to have generated another position *within* the stagnating and introspective debate, rather than offering a way out of it.

## **Environmental vocabularies**

Although some positions have attained broad philosophical support within the discourse of environmental philosophy, it seems that their *practical* project – that of contributing to environmental solutions by changing our ethical convictions – has not succeeded. While philosophers are debating the benefits of “ecocentrism”, “biocentrism” and “weak anthropocentrism”, none of these ethical systems seems to have reached the common convictions of the public. It is hard to see how even a unanimous philosophical agreement on a given “centrism” would suddenly transform public opinion. If it is the case that a new ethic would help us resolve the crisis, and philosophy fails to provide us with one, then perhaps it is time to abandon the whole philosophical project of *providing* an ethic. As a practical problem, the environmental crisis requires us to direct ourselves towards that which might work *in practice*.

The conception of moral progress as increasing moral knowledge, and of philosophical theory as the access to undistorted insights in morality, may well be philosophically justified. However, the efforts towards which these conceptions have directed us seem void of the practical significance they are aimed towards. The environmental crisis is too grave a problem to dogmatically protect philosophical axioms, no matter how convincing or universal their arguments are. We cannot afford to overlook other perspectives.

A perspective which breaks sharply with the conceptions and assumptions of foundationalist philosophy is that of Richard Rorty. His historicist account of truth and morality makes the idea of providing a foundation uninteresting, and brings about a perspective on moral progress which disconnects it from philosophical theory and argumentative justification. Rorty's writings are motivated by a genuine doubt about the practical utility of the image of truth as representation. The idea that the aim of language is to "mirror" nature, along with the consequent thought that the pure language of philosophy can discover the "real" nature of things, has been a basic assumption of western philosophy since Plato. It is this epistemological conception of truth and language that has given philosophy the role of a meta-discipline with the ability to determine validity across all other disciplines. The epistemological hierarchy of knowledge is basic to the ability of philosophy to provide foundations for the insights of other disciplines.

Rorty suggests that we abandon this representational conception of truth, language and philosophy, and replace it with a conception of languages as useful tools in coping with the world around us. In this view, to use a language is not a matter of representing reality "out there", but of achieving practical goals. To be a language user is to learn the rules of a given *language game*. Concepts like truth, certainty and validity refer to these rules; rules which could have been different – and which *are* different in other language games. As means of adaptation rather than media of representation, the given language games we use are *contingent*. From this viewpoint, the vocabulary of foundationalist philosophy is simply another language game, with its own rules of truth and justification. Since the rules that determine truth and justification are internal to each language game, there is no truth to be discovered on their outside.

From this perspective, the rules within the vocabulary of environmental philosophy are *different from*, and not foundational to, the rules of our public discourses. There are no rules on the "outside", no universal meta-vocabulary that could distinguish *between* different vocabularies. Consequently, there is no pre-

lingual truth about the moral value of nature to be discovered. To the extent that philosophical theory can reach *objective* insights into the domain of morality, this is simply a matter of providing broadly accepted *summaries* of the convictions we have in common. Like other language use, philosophical theories depend on social justification. To Rorty, objectivity is a mark of *normal discourse* – language use which subscribes to the shared frame of basic assumptions within a vocabulary. Consequently, for a theory to be objective implies that it is justified, by virtue of the conventions of the given vocabulary, as normal discourse.

*Abnormal* discourse, on the other hand, is a matter of suggesting *new* vocabularies. Such language use does not relate to the accepted rules of a vocabulary, and so are *metaphorical* expressions rather than sentences with literal meaning. To Rorty, progress and change are not a matter of increasing our knowledge or achieving certainty, but rather of finding new perspectives, new ways of talking about the world – *other tools* that might be better suited to achieve our practical goals. Rorty calls this kind of language use *redescription*, and this is what his own writings are aiming towards. Rorty's writings do not offer a philosophical system, but aim to create a new way of talking about ourselves and the world.

Similarly, when this thesis brings Rorty into the discussion on environmental ethics, it is in no way an attempt to establish and provide validity for a new *position* within environmental ethics. Rather, the aim is to try out a new *way of talking* about environmental values and ethics, one which breaks completely with the (thus far) unfruitful framework of environmental foundationalism. A Rortyan perspective on environmental ethics is not a theory of environmental ethics, but a suggestion of a new *vocabulary* of ethics, moral progress and the environment. It is a perspective from which the topics of moral progress and environmental ethics can be approached without the intention of providing foundations, and without the restraining idea that justification of values must be universal. This is because, in contrast to the environmental foundationalists, Rorty conceives of values and ethics as social phenomena – as parts of contingent vocabularies that can be

replaced by other contingent vocabularies. With Rorty, we can replace the foundationalist question “how do we establish environmental values on solid ground” with questions like “given the need for more environmental practices, what ways of talking about nature and ourselves could get us closer to where we want to be”. The foundationalist way of framing the topic concerns how the discipline of philosophy should go about solving the puzzle of the environmental ethic. The relation to public discourses and established convictions is somewhat unclear. The Rortyan question, on the other hand, addresses our public discourse directly, and takes our shared convictions as starting point. In contrast to the foundationalist approach to environmental ethics, Rorty’s perspective does not theorize the question at hand, but focuses on that which can make a difference in practice.

Rorty’s vocabulary opens up a new perspective – one in which moral progress is not a matter of foundations and moral knowledge, but of extending our loyalties through experiencing the sufferings of new groups of beings. Such experiences have little to do with ethical theory, and more to do with narrative and poetic works of literature. In contrast to philosophical and scientific literature, these genres have the advantage of telling stories rather than argument, theories and explanations. Although theories and arguments have their value, it is a privilege of the narrative and poetic to expose us emotionally to the sufferings, perspectives and needs of those of which we were previously ignorant.

This thesis follows this line of thought by turning away from environmental theory and towards narrative and poetic nature-writing. If the solution of the environmental crisis requires that we extend our ethical boundaries towards the inclusion of nonhuman nature, then literary redescrptions of ourselves and the world, which challenge the limits of our current ethical convictions, may provide efficient tools for approaching that aim. The writings of Aldo Leopold and Wislawa Szymborska serve as good examples of literature that redescrbes nature and our relation to it, opening up perspectives that conflict with consumptive and careless attitudes towards nature. The reductionist conception of these writings as

artistic expressions and formulations of philosophical ideas is replaced by a reading which conceives of them as attempts to abandon some of our old vocabularies, and to suggest new ways of talking which might bring us closer to the inclusion of non-human nature.

Admittedly, there is no guarantee that such environmental narratives will make us more environmentally responsible, or render our practices sustainable. This thesis offers no empirical evidence of the tendency of narratives to further moral progress. Rather, the aim of this thesis is to suggest a new way of approaching a practical problem, a problem to which our current approaches are not working as we would like them to. As such, it offers one possible description among many others. The question is not if Rorty's perspective is the right perspective, but whether it can offer helpful tools for the aims we set for ourselves. A Rortyan understanding of environmental moral progress has the advantage of playing down the distinction between humanistic and environmental ethics. Leaving the language of ultimate justification behind, we can approach environmental ethics and values as a practical problem, without leaving the field of concrete action. As there are no "given" limits to our loyalty and solidarity, the emergence of an environmental ethic is simply a matter of continuously suggesting new metaphors, and of hoping that the metaphors of a more inclusive moral community turn into new vocabularies of morality and solidarity.

However, although narrative and poetic literature may be an efficient tool in the work towards moral progress, it cannot guarantee that new convictions are reflected in new practices. As Rorty himself acknowledges, changes in our societies depend not only on moral progress, but also on the efficiency of the public discourse as a tool for *achieving* changes in practice. Different aims call for different tools. If moral progress is a matter of metaphorical literature suggesting new perspectives and ideals, it is a challenge for our *public* discourse to achieve our common perspectives and ideals. In contrast to tools of moral progress, the achievement of our common environmental ideals depends on our public environmental discourse to be efficient as *normal discourse*, as

argumentative exchange on the basis of *common* premises. To paraphrase Rorty, we need a public discourse where our common environmental premises can be realized through argumentative exchange and policy-directed debate.

Such a realization, however, seems to be hindered by the immense grandeur and complexity by which environmental problems are described. Perhaps we can speed up the process and narrow the gap between intentions and actions, if we try to adapt these descriptions to the frames of our perspectives and comprehension. If the public vocabulary of a global, catastrophic and impending crisis is paralyzing, it may not be the best tool for the achievement of our ideals. Perhaps, then, we should replace it with an environmental vocabulary which focuses on more local and concrete problems and efforts. A vocabulary where the “we” that needs to change is smaller, and where the potential consequences are less apocalyptic, might narrow the gap between our increasingly environmental intentions and the practical changes towards which they point us.

## **Methods - Vocabularies and literary criticism**

This thesis is written from a philosophical point of view. As a philosophical contribution to the debate on environmental ethics, it revolves around the various perspectives and arguments that make up the philosophical discourse of environmental ethics, and the prospects of a new perspective influenced by Rorty’s writings. However, these positions are not discussed in terms of philosophical justification or validity, but in terms of the practical implications of their way of framing the problem at hand. To enter into argumentative discussion with the various proponents of environmental philosophy is only meaningful if one accepts the basic premises of that discourse. The starting point of this thesis, however, is the observation that this discourse *as a whole* appears to have lost touch with the practical circumstance to which it is a reaction. The problem for environmental foundationalism, accordingly, is not that its philosophical arguments are unsound, but that they are *philosophical* arguments directed towards *philosophical* justification. To approach our values at a “deeper” level is



uncontroversial *within* philosophy, but does not seem to have changed anything on its outside.

This thesis, therefore, relates to the discourse of environmental ethics as *metaphor* rather than as argument. It is an attempt to follow up Rorty's notion that change does not come from objective arguments, but from suggesting *new vocabularies*, new ways of talking about the subject matter. My approach to the discourse of environmental ethics is parallel to Rorty's approach to the discourse of foundationalist philosophy: Instead of discussing language use, values and perspectives in terms of justification, truth and foundations, I discuss their ability to promote practical aims. Rather than assessing the validity of sentences, I approach the *vocabularies* in which they are formed, asking where they are taking us, and what consequences they have for how we behave.

The vocabularies of environmental foundationalism and environmental pragmatism are approached from *another* vocabulary, one which conceives of these as tools for the amelioration of the environmental crisis. My critique of these perspectives is that they, as tools, seem not to be working towards their intended goal. From this perspective, the introspective character of environmental foundationalism makes this discourse an idle tool – one which we cannot put to use for the challenge we have encountered. A tool that does not work is replaced with another. However, since there is no a priori criterion of tool-choice, acquiring the tool which works is a matter of trying out the ones that look promising until we achieve what we are striving for. This thesis is an attempt to suggest some tools which may work better than the ones we have tried so far.

To my knowledge, a Rortyan perspective on environmental ethics which breaks with the vocabulary of foundationalism has not yet been fully worked out. The attempt to fill this void is motivated by the potential of this perspective to come up with better tools for coping with the challenges we face. This approach explains why the philosophical criticism of Rorty's writings has not been prioritized in this thesis. The charge of relativism, or of self-referential

inconsistency, may be interesting to the discussion of epistemology and other philosophical topics, but they are not relevant to the project at hand. What is germane to this thesis is whether a Rortyan perspective on ethics and moral progress amounts to a way of talking which can help redirect our focus towards the *practical* problems of the environment.

Admittedly, the readings offered in the first and second chapter of this thesis do not do justice to all variations of environmental foundationalism and environmental pragmatism. However, the point is not that *all* writings within environmental ethics are fruitless, but that the set of common premises which I describe as the assumptions of environmental foundationalism seem to be taking us away from practice instead of towards it. The selection of writers is an attempt to illustrate this tendency among philosophers that have had, and still have, a significant impact on the discourse of environmental ethics<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, the criticism of these various positions is not directed towards the arguments and propositions of each of them, but rather towards the common premises of the discourse in which they are expressed. These premises are not criticized for lacking justification or relying on invalid arguments, but because they constitute a way of talking which does not move us in the direction we aim for.

This is also the case for the remarks on the Rortyan conception of social change, presented in chapter four. Here, the question is whether we can settle with *hoping* for the emergence of an environmental ethic, and with hoping that this ethic will lead us towards the changes we seek. Although Rorty is usually rather vague when discussing more concrete implications, he does emphasize the difference between moral progress and the challenge of *achieving* our cultural ideals. The notion, at the end of this thesis, that the tools that work towards moral progress are not sufficient on their own to ensure environmental protection, is a suggestion that we must supplement them with the use of other tools in order to achieve what they aim for.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Light & Rolston III (2009); Light & Katz (1996); Keller (2010)

In this thesis, I compare different vocabularies and perspectives with the aim of suggesting some of them as more promising tools than others. As such, it is more of a work of literary criticism (in the Rortyan, broad sense) than it is a work of philosophy. After all, even philosophy is a literary genre – a kind of writing<sup>2</sup>. As a literary critic, I do not approach the subject of environmental ethics with the epistemic authority of the philosopher, but with a familiarity with a range of genres and vocabularies, with a toolbox of suggestions as to how we could change our vocabularies. As an ironist, I treat different vocabularies not as closer to or further from reality, but as more or less helpful tools in the efforts to reach our common goals. Environmental foundationalism is a tool that I have abandoned. This thesis is an attempt to suggest some new ones in its place.

## Terminology

In this thesis, the concept of “intrinsic value” is treated as parallel to those of “inherent value”, “value in itself”, “end value” and “value in the philosophical sense”. Although these concepts sometimes are used in different meanings, their use in this thesis expresses the value that an entity may have for the good of its own sake, i.e. not as instrumental value for the good of some *other* entity.

The general concept of pragmatism is largely left undiscussed in this thesis. This is partly due to the controversy between various writers over what pragmatism is or should be. This debate is not particularly relevant to the topic of this thesis. The distinction by which Rorty is contrasted with other writers in this thesis is that between foundationalism and anti-foundationalism. For practical reasons, I refer to Rorty mainly as an anti-foundationalist rather than as a pragmatist or a neo-pragmatist. I do not offer a definition of pragmatism as such. Instead, I approach environmental pragmatism and Rortyan anti-foundationalism as two ways of perceiving ethical theory and moral progress. This choice has no

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<sup>2</sup> See Rorty (1978)

connection to my opinions on what counts as pragmatisms, but simply has the practical advantage of avoiding complication of terms and definitions.

Some of the words by which I characterize various philosophical positions and tendencies are less rigorous and categorical than one could expect from a philosophical paper. Instead of words like “unnecessary”, “erroneous” and “valid”, this thesis takes use of words like “uninteresting”, “unfavourable” and “helpful”. The choice of these words follows from the aim of this thesis to approach various environmental discourses as more or less helpful tools, rather than as more or less well-grounded theories.

## Overview

The first chapter is an attempt to illustrate, through the reading of a selection of central texts, that the failure of environmental foundationalism to reach its practical goals is connected to its universalistic ambitions in the attempt to ground a new ethic. Diverse “centrisms”, along with philosophical arguments of validity, are presented as proposals for a new set of basic convictions, ready to be implemented in society. The project is that of reaching beneath mere perspective to discover value at a deeper level than our public discourses, hoping to resolve the debate with conclusive, objective answers. As this project constitutes the common frame of environmental foundationalism, I argue that its premises are connected to the stagnation of environmental ethics within the discipline of philosophy.

The second chapter introduces the perspective of *environmental pragmatism*, a branch of environmental ethics which aims to break with the assumptions of environmental foundationalism in order to resolve the apparent stagnation. I argue, however, that their attempt to avoid foundationalism leads them to propose a new, *pragmatic*, foundation for environmental values. As such, their contribution fails to leave the stagnating discourse of environmental foundationalism. Therefore, this chapter introduces the basic ideas of Richard

Rorty's anti-foundationalism, hoping that these may offer a new way of approaching environmental values. Rorty abandons the idea that values can have a foundation outside their vocabularies, along with the idea that ethical theory is an instrument of social change. Similarly, I abandon the project of environmental foundationalism, as well as the attempt to construe pragmatism as an environmental ethic. Both projects are attempts to connect human practices and values to metaphysical or philosophical foundations.

The third chapter discusses the relation between literature and social change. It presents the Rortyan notion that moral progress is a matter of creating *new vocabularies* rather than increasing moral knowledge. I argue that environmental foundationalism, conceived of as theoretical attempts to assert distribution of value, offers no more than "thin" ethical descriptions – *summaries* – of cultural convictions which do not currently prevail. Furthermore, the progress towards such convictions depends not on theoretical summaries, but on the creation of new vocabularies in which nature and its relations to human beings attain other meanings and values. As this is a creative, and not philosophical, effort, I turn to the poetic and narrative writings of Wislawa Szymborska and Aldo Leopold in order to illustrate how creative literature might influence our environmental convictions. This section is also an attempt to illustrate how we, as literary critics, might contribute to this process. I conclude that environmental moral progress is, at least in part, a matter of ecological redescription.

The fourth chapter is an attempt to connect the historicist conception of environmental moral progress with the philosophically neglected point that the environmental crisis is a *practical* problem. Finding its parallel in Rorty's *Achieving Our Country*, this chapter starts with the observation that the environmental values and ideals which we in fact *have* attained do not seem to make much difference in our concrete policy and practices. I argue that the solution to the environmental crisis cannot be attained through environmental moral progress alone, but requires that we work towards *achieving* our new

ideals. Drawing on Rorty's conception of languages as tools, I suggest that the tools for attaining environmental moral progress should be distinguished from the tools of *achieving* our common ideals and convictions. Arguing against Timothy Morton's insistence on treating the environment as a *hyperobject*, I propose that one way of getting closer to achieving our environmental values is to simplify the descriptions of the environmental problems in the public discourse, and aim to make our concerns and efforts more local and concrete.

# 1. Foundations in environmental philosophy

## 1.1 Introduction

The emergence of the environmental crisis has led writers from a number of disciplines and traditions to search for ways to change our destructive patterns of behavior. Within the discipline of philosophy, this effort has gradually brought about a new philosophical discourse – one in which such change is sought through a replacement of the values which constitute our moral outlook. This chapter offers a perspective on *environmental foundationalism*, approached not as a set of philosophical arguments and propositions, but as a philosophical discourse distinguished by a shared self-conception and a certain way of approaching social and ethical problems. Proponents of environmental foundationalism share the aim of providing a solution to the environmental crisis by taking our values to a deeper, philosophical level of unbiased and perspective free insights. Although this branch of philosophy incorporates a vast range of philosophically diverse ideas and concepts, it is unified by the common project of providing ethical foundations to questions of the environment.

The environmental discourse to which these writers seek to contribute is a complex discourse where a number of opposed parties uphold conflicting values and opinions on practical environmental issues. As with most occurrences of value conflict in society, various parties normally advocate opinions and solutions that are profitable for their own cause, or from their own perspective. As we will see from this chapter, the foundationalist response to this complex situation of value-disagreement is to attempt to provide a set of values that is *perspective free*, and that as such goes beyond the realm of opinions, points of view or particular interests. The thought that philosophy can offer unbiased foundations for norms, moral intuitions or truths presupposes a philosophical viewpoint on morality and knowledge which is privileged with an epistemological authority. In

a word, philosophy is the attempt to reach a *view from nowhere*. While conflicting parties of the environmental debate can only advocate what has value in their own perspective, environmental philosophers can solve conflicts of interests and values by going beyond mere perspective and discover what *really* has value, and what is *really* true.

In this chapter, we will see that foundationalist environmental philosophy emerged as an attempt to solve environmental problems by offering a set of unconditional truths about the value of nature. We will see that although this has been attempted in different ways, the contributions within environmental foundationalism have all been preoccupied with philosophical principles rather than with practical environmental problems. I will argue that this focus has led to a situation in which philosophical ideas are bounced back and forth within philosophy departments, without approaching the original goal of contributing to the solution of environmental problems. The explicit goal of environmental foundationalism to contribute to an environmental solution is impeded by its own common premises. As it turns out, various environmental foundationalists have *different* perspectives on what the perspective *free* ethic should look like. The assumption that there is one final answer to the question of value in nature is challenged by the existence of various “centrisms”. John Dewey once wrote that ethical theory had been trapped in the search for the one ultimate truth on which to determine the moral worth of our actions, and that the common assumption that such a truth exists led them to continue this perpetual philosophical endeavor (Dewey 2004: 92-93). In this chapter, I argue that Dewey’s description fits environmental foundationalism well, and that their presuppositions about philosophical knowledge and moral insight lead them in an unfavorable direction.

In the following sections of this chapter, I will offer a reading of the “new problem” of philosophy as it is framed by Richard Routley, along with his interpretation of the problem and its possible solutions. I argue that the foundationalist character of environmental philosophy is present already in Routley’s way of framing his call for a new ethic. As Routley’s call is a challenge



to philosophy as a discipline, this chapter discusses some of the most notable attempts to answer this call. Although I will briefly discuss some similarities and differences among these theories, the aim of this chapter is to illustrate how the foundationalist project shapes the *discourse* of environmental ethics. The discussion of the conflicting positions within foundational environmental philosophy also illustrates how foundationalism helps to isolate environmental ethics in an introverted and scholastic debate within philosophy departments, rather than contributing to the public debate with new perspectives. I end the chapter with some remarks about foundationalism and why environmental foundationalism may not have had the influence its proponents had hoped for.

## 1.2 From practice to theory – Richard Routley

Richard Routley was one of the first philosophers to address the increasingly problematic relationship between human beings and their natural environment. As such, he is an important part of the process by which the cultural challenges of the environment have become a question of providing an environmental *ethic*. Many of the later contributors to the philosophical debate refer explicitly to the perspective and challenge laid out in Routley's paper "Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental, Ethic?" (2009). As we will see in this chapter, the discourse of environmental foundationalism can be read as an attempt to follow up Routley's opening line:

It is increasingly said that civilization, Western civilization at least, stands in need of a new ethic [...] setting out people's relations to the natural environment (Routley 2009:47).

Routley embraces Aldo Leopold's view that ethics must deal with our relation to non-human nature, and asserts that an environmental ethic is one that can determine maltreatment of land and interference with wilderness as morally wrong, even in cases where there are no repercussions for fellow human beings (Routley 2009:47). Having established a defining feature of an environmental

ethic, Routley now goes on to discuss how philosophers can cope with the task of supplying such an ethic. The first question he poses is whether the existing ethical theories can be extended and modified so as to transform into an environmental ethic, or if they rather must be replaced by completely *new* ethical theories that incorporate non-human nature in a satisfactory way (Routley 2009:47).

Although Routley has not, at this point of the paper, presented his arguments or opinions on the subject, certain premises and ideas are evident in his introduction of the problem. The framing of this new need indicates a certain way of conceiving the problem at hand. We have to assume that a need for a new ethic has its roots in the fact that various ethically blameworthy practices and actions in the social world could be *different*. Otherwise, a call for a new ethic would hardly be appropriate. If we were to take these practices and actions as the subject for an essay about environmental problems, we might imagine asking questions like “what practices should we change, and how do we change them?” Routley implicitly answers these questions by declaring the need for a new ethic. To him, changes in these practices are seen as dependent upon changes in the ethical domain. However, it is still open what such a change in the ethical domain could look like, and how it could be attained. The notion of ethics here is used in a special sense, and the way Routley approaches it tells us something about his perspective on what role *philosophy* should assume in sorting out our relations to non-human nature.

A commonsensical reading of the “need for a new ethic” could be something like “we need to start taking non-human nature into account when we act”. This claim would probably harmonize quite well with the attitudes of most environmentally concerned persons, and does not demand any special justification. Although our societies are comprised of different people with different dispositions, it is not a philosophically complicated matter to suggest plainly that we all stop “maltreating land” and “interfering exceedingly with wilderness”. Routley, however, is not interested in general suggestions of changes in practices or

commonsensical ideas about what we should do; he is after something more specific. The affirmation of the need for ethical change leads him not to a discussion about what *people* should do, but about what *philosophers* should do. The focus of the paper is not whether, or in what ways, we need to adapt our multitude of practices and ethical dispositions so as to improve our treatment of non-human nature. Routley is rather asking if we need *a* new ethic, *a* new foundation for values, rights or imperatives that we should incorporate in our practices. Providing such an ethic is not a task suited for everyone – it is the classical task of the foundationalist philosopher.

Routley continues by assessing the prospects of our current ethical theories in order to figure out if an environmental ethic is already available. After a swift examination of the attitudes towards nature in what he calls “the Western super ethic” (the broad common premises of today’s ethical frameworks), Routley rejects the whole picture. He does this on account of its tendency towards what he calls “human chauvinism”, i.e. the principle that human beings may do as they please as long as they refrain from harming others or themselves (Routley 2009:49). To Routley, an ethical system that allows human beings to ruthlessly exploit and destroy non-human nature is fundamentally flawed, as such actions are “to a greater or lesser extent evil, and hence in serious cases morally impermissible” (Routley 2009:50). Since none of the human-non-human relations available within this framework are viable roles for human beings who maintain an environmental ethic, he affirms the need for a new ethic (Routley 2009:48-50). Fortunately, Routley does not leave us with this challenge without offering some indications of what this new ethic should look like. His rejection of human chauvinism, presented as a basic feature of our current ethical systems, leads him to realize that profound changes in our ethical frameworks are required. Routley argues that, since -

a radical change in a theory sometimes forces changes in meta-theory [...], an environmental ethic compels reexamination and modified analysis of such characteristic actions as natural right, ground of right, and the relations of obligation and permissibility to rights; it may well require re-assessment of such

notions as value and right, especially where these are based on chauvinist assumptions (Routley 2009: 51)

By asserting that we need a new, environmental ethic, Routley means to introduce the philosophical project of *providing* a new ethic. The concepts of rights, duties values and other meta-ethical notions must be revised and synthesized in a non-chauvinistic manner, and new environmental concepts such as conservation and pollution should extend the borders of our ethical systems (Routley 2009:51). Furthermore, the new ethic must be sufficiently detached from human interests and preferences, since these are “far too parochial to provide a satisfactory basis for deciding on what is environmentally desirable” (Routley 2009:52).

Routley’s way of conceiving the problem, as well as the criteria for its solution, had significant influence on the emergence of environmental foundationalism. Routley observes that certain changes in human practice are necessary in order to cope with the environmental challenges, and that these should be addressed through an account of their ethical presuppositions. He presumes that the task of supplying us with a legitimate ethical framework is a philosophical one. Furthermore, he shows us that the ethical frameworks embraced in our current societies share features that are not compatible with an environmental ethic – i.e. an ethic that does not fall under human chauvinism. He shows us that to avoid this pitfall, the new environmental ethic must find its grounding in revised versions of concepts like value, right and duty, and that it must not let human desires and preferences affect its distribution of vices and virtues.

A simplified description of Routley’s assumptions might be as follows: 1. Human beings cause unsustainable harm to non-human nature. 2. We must find a way to reduce this tendency. 3. This can be done by making people change the way they behave. 4. We can change the way people behave by providing a new ethic. 5. Philosophers can provide this new ethic, legitimizing actions and practices that are in tune with the environmental ethic, and proscribing the ones that are not. 6. This will make people change the way they behave, and thus prevent them from

causing non-human nature unsustainable harm. In this overview, the first three steps are relatively uncontroversial, while the three last steps introduce a particular way of conceiving ethics and moral progress. Taken together, they constitute what we may call the foundationalist direction of environmental ethics: The idea that that we can change society and solve practical problems by offering ethical theories that rest on philosophical foundations.

Routley's approach to the problem of environmental degradation reveals that a special role within the environmental discourse is reserved for philosophical theory. The observation of an ethical shortcoming within our practical lives leads him to presume that there is "grounding" work for philosophers. Accordingly, Routley frames the practical matter of environmentally unfavorable practices as a philosophical matter of supplying a new *theory* of the goodness of practices. In other words, he requests a *philosophical* means of improvement for our *practical* dealings with non-human nature. Arguably, this request encourages a certain kind of philosophy – one which aims at improving society through discovering its *foundations*. In the following, I will offer a reading of some prominent attempts to answer Routley's challenge. I do not intend to engage in philosophical discussion with these theorists, but to discuss them with the aim of clarifying how the various environmental philosophers conceive of their own role in the solution of the environmental crisis.

### 1.3 Environmental foundationalism and the centrism-debate

In Routley's paper, philosophers are encouraged to come up with an ethic that can replace our prevalent chauvinistic ethical frameworks. Although Routley himself does not provide a clear outline for such an ethic, some features are outlined. He argues that an environmental ethic must proscribe destructive behavior towards non-human nature, and that the value of the latter must be established independently of human interests and preferences. Routley (2009:52)

cautions that we must be free of *species bias* when formulating an environmental ethic. These requirements have been accepted by many writers on the topic, particularly throughout the various versions of non-anthropocentrism.

In the decades following the publication of Routley's paper, a considerable number of philosophers have taken up his challenge, eventually comprising the new branch of environmental philosophy. His caution against species bias is generally incorporated, and resonates within various environmentalist positions. Arguably, the caution against species bias is reflected in the tendency of environmental philosophers to take the *location of value* in nature as the center of their task. If human interests and preferences are not to be given weight in the moral consideration of nature, then something *other* than our interests and preferences must constitute the baseline of an environmental ethic. Such an ethic must accordingly break with the tradition which sees human beings as the only holders of core value, as well as with the tendency to associate value with human preferences and interests. While it is clear that value must be philosophically located in non-human nature in order to provide an environmental ethic, it is not so clear *where* in non-human nature the value-core of environmental philosophy should be placed. In this section, philosophical positions with different loci of non-human natural value will be approached and read as variations of the project of establishing an *environmental centrism* as an alternative to anthropocentrism.

Paul Taylor is a prominent advocate of non-anthropocentric ethical theory, and argues for *biocentrism*, a life-centered ethical position. The concept of biocentrism is central to predominant positions of environmental ethics, and constitutes a central idea also among the advocates of deep ecology (Næss 2009: 264). In Taylor's paper "The Ethics of Respect for Nature" (2009), he introduces what he calls *the attitude of respect for nature*. The core argument is that all individual living organisms – not merely the members of the human species – have value, simply by virtue of carrying the attribute of life. In a biocentric ethic, all living things are "*appropriate objects of the attitude of respect* and are accordingly regarded as entities possessing inherent worth" (Taylor 2009:76).

Thus, while by an anthropocentric ethic, an action is deemed right or wrong in accordance to favorability for human beings or consistency with human rights norms, by a biocentric ethic we are also obliged to respect individual plants and animals for their own sake, as they have a good on their own (Taylor 2009:74).

Taylor has an Aristotelian perspective on the question of how such a “good on its own” among all living things should be understood. To him, the good of a non-human organism can be thought of as “the full development of its biological powers. Its good is realized to the extent that it is strong and healthy” (Taylor 2009:75). The moral worth of our actions, then, is to be determined in accordance with the consequences for the strength and healthiness of all biological entities.

Taylor emphasizes the point, borrowed from ecological science, that all living things are interdependent in an “organically unified order whose balance and stability are necessary conditions for the realization of the good of its constituent biotic communities” (Taylor 2009:75). The biocentric outlook sees human beings as members of the earth’s *community life*, sharing a relationship to the earth that resembles that of other species. Like other species, we depend upon the balance and stability of earth’s various ecosystems for our existence (Taylor 2009:77). As Taylor sees it, our difference from other species consists of the fact that our own ecological dependence is not mutual – the planet would be fine without the existence of human beings (Taylor 2009:78).

However, although Taylor’s ecological worldview is holistic, his theory is not an instance of *ethical* holism. On the significance of holism, Taylor remarks:

Its ethical implications for our treatment of the natural environment lie entirely in the fact that our knowledge of these causal connections is an essential means to fulfilling the aims we set for ourselves in adopting the attitude of respect for nature (Taylor 2009:78)

Thus, it is not within species, ecosystems or the earth as a whole that he places the core value of his environmental ethic, but within each *individual* living organism. Every such organism is “a teleological center of life” (Taylor 2009:78), and thus bears the mark of inherent worth. To Taylor, the conception of teleology

in every organism allows us to *take the perspective* of every such individual. Since each of them is a “unified system of goal-oriented activities directed toward their preservation and well-being” (Taylor 2009:79), we can take their perspective in the sense of knowing what they value, so to speak, and thus determine what is good or bad *for* that individual organism. This ability of taking the perspective of another organism also helps us to get rid of the idea of human superiority: While human qualities are good from a human standpoint, the abilities and qualities of a given organism are directed towards its own well-being, and so are equally good from the perspective of that organism (Taylor 2009: 80).

The differences in value between human beings and other organisms, Taylor continues, is a question of *merit*. Merit, however, cannot constitute the basis of *inherent worth*, as this would entail a stratification of human beings based on their successfulness in a given society (Taylor 2009:81). Asserting that such a position would be as intolerable as it would be philosophically unjustifiable, Taylor continues by refuting the conception of man as superior to the rest of nature. When we assess our relation to other species from the point of view of the biocentric outlook, he insists, we will understand them and their ecological conditions and relationships, and discover “a deep sense of our kinship with them as fellow members of the Earth’s community of life” (Taylor 2009:83). Furthermore, if we take seriously the holistic worldview of the biocentric outlook, in which humans and nonhumans are interrelated in a unified whole of individual teleological centers of life striving for their own good, we will *discover* that we have a moral relation to these organisms. (Taylor 2009:83). The crux of Taylor’s argument is that if we take seriously the biocentric outlook (the picture of earth as an organic system with teleological life in every organism) and accordingly abandon the thought of human superiority, we simply *will* come to consider our non-human co-inhabitants as bearers of inherent worth.

Taylor’s substitution of biocentrism for anthropocentric chauvinism follows this line of argument: Appreciating the basic findings of ecological science lets us



view nature as an organic whole in which organisms strive towards their own goals of well-being and strength. If we take this insight seriously, we will see that from the perspective of a given being, certain things are good and certain things are bad even for flowers and bacteria. We will also realize that these value judgments are as good as our own judgments about human goods and evils. The image of human superiority vanishes through our process of stepping out of our own perspective in order to see the world and its values from a *neutral standpoint*.

From this perspective, it is not only humans that have inherent worth, but every individual living organism, simply in virtue of carrying the attribute of life. To Taylor, the inherent worth of every individual living organism is ready to be discovered once we rid ourselves of the misguided assumptions of human chauvinism. These assumptions are refuted by the findings of ecological science, findings which, according to Taylor, these would be “found acceptable by any rational and scientifically informed thinker who is fully “open” to the reality of the lives of nonhuman organisms” (Taylor 2009:83). Thus, in Taylor’s view, every rational thinker will accept the biocentric outlook, and anyone who accepts the biocentric outlook seriously will *discover* inherent value in non-human nature. That means that every rational thinker who does not currently appreciate the inherent worth of non-human organisms fails to do so simply by virtue of her being insufficiently “scientifically informed” about the findings of ecological science, or by virtue of not focusing on the individual organism. In short, biocentrism is the only rational ethic available.

Taylor’s environmental ethic is an attempt to supply inherent value to non-human nature without applying strict moral rules and principles. The foundations of his theory are found in scientific principles of ecological science and the assertion of an intuitive moral reaction to these principles when they are taken seriously. From these sources, he is able to infer that the feature of life in a given organism is a token of inherent value. Taylor’s way of answering Routley’s challenge is to construe a life-centered ethical theory, combining the interrelatedness of our

ecosystems and its members with the teleological individuality of each single organism. Taylor picks out individual life as the bearer of intrinsic value, and builds his theory around this entity, backing it up with its relatedness to the rest of the living world. His contribution is illustrative of the foundationalist tendencies of environmental philosophy: It (1) conceives the environmental problem as an ethical problem, and construes (2) the ethical problem as a philosophical puzzle to be solved by way of argument. The solution of the puzzle (3) is accordingly presented as a “new ethic” – a set of foundational principles for questions of moral deliberation, ready for implementation into policy and normative regulation. The perspective free and neutral approach of philosophy ensures the universality of arguments, and removes the contingencies of species biases and human interests. In short, Taylor’s biocentrism corrects our misguided beliefs about value and morality by discovering the *real* distribution of value and moral worth. Although his biocentric position is opposed by other environmental philosophers, the conception of environmental philosophy as a detached moral guide is not unique to Paul Taylor.

In contrast to Taylor’s individualistic biocentrism, many writers on environmental ethics take a more eco-oriented approach, finding the baseline of intrinsic value not in the individual organism, but in larger entities like ecosystems and natural communities. One such writer is J. Baird Callicott, a prominent advocate of Aldo Leopold’s writings. In his paper, “The Conceptual Foundations of the Land Ethic”, Callicott addresses the philosophical implications and presuppositions of Leopold’s land ethic, and accounts for a Darwinist theory of moral development. Callicott affirms Leopold’s view, supported by anthropological studies, that the “boundaries of the moral community are generally coextensive with the perceived boundaries of society” (Callicott 1989:80). He illustrates this view by referring to today’s global humanism as a “response to a perception [...] that mankind worldwide is united into one society, one community” (Callicott 1989:81). To Callicott, the universal humanistic ethic is merely the presently last step in the process of extending our ethical boundaries by expanding our concepts of

community. The next step of this process is the conceptualization of *land as a biotic community*, and a corresponding ethical extension – the land ethic – in the collective cultural consciousness (Callicott 1989:83).

In his “Non-Anthropocentric Value Theory and Environmental Ethics”, Callicott (2005:74-75) elaborates on what he calls the Darwin-Leopold ethical theory, and connects it to the Humean picture of morality as ultimately connected to sentiments. In support of Leopold’s land ethic, he asserts that although value is always grounded in human sentiments and thus *anthropogenic*, moral sentiments are in their nature “other-oriented”, and thus not anthropocentric, i.e. not directed only towards human beings. In reference to Leopold’s theory of ethical expansion, Callicott notes that we are now in a time where the whole of the earth has been included in our sentimental reach, allowing us to value the community of the planet as intrinsically valuable (Callicott 2005:75). The maxim of the land ethic reads:

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise. (Leopold 1987:224-225)

As Callicott notes, there is nothing in this maxim proposing a responsibility to or inherent value of individual natural entities. According to the land ethic, then, it is the consequences for the biotic community *as a whole* that determine the moral worth of our actions. This ethical holism, Callicott asserts, is consistent with the Darwinist picture of ethical development because it integrates the findings of ecological science. The *ecological relationships* within species and ecosystems, and not individual organisms, are ethically primary, since the latter depends on the former for its adaptive behavior and form (Callicott 1987:200). As a philosophical position, the land ethic of Leopold and Callicott supplies non-human nature with intrinsic value, or “value in the philosophical sense” (Leopold 1987:223), by virtue of the relationships within biotic communities that enables the existence of organisms. Given the primacy of the ecological relationships in nature, it is the whole of the biotic community, and not individual organisms, which has intrinsic value. As such, the land ethic constitutes an *ecocentrism*,

where the intrinsic value is located in the general ecological system rather than within its individual members.

In contrast to Taylor's biocentrism, the philosophical core of the land ethic is not the attribute of individual life, but the ecological *primacy of the whole*. The two philosophical theories, however, are far from antithetical: The *aim* of both theories is to provide a foundational environmental ethic that proscribes actions that undermines the wellbeing of non-human nature. The *method* of providing such an ethic is also strikingly similar: Both theories attempt to find a link between perspectives from ecology and the intrinsic value in non-human nature, thus providing us with a moral maxim that breaks with the doxas of human chauvinism without simply asserting groundless alternatives.

As Callicott remarks, Leopold's writings would be nothing "more than a fine nature book had its author not [...] been a philosopher" (Callicott 1987:8). In other words, environmental philosophy is not about *suggesting* that non-human nature has value. It is about providing safe, neutral foundations for such value. Both Callicott's land ethic and Taylor's biocentrism approach this task through linking established knowledge from ecological science with ethical assertions, not about what we *should* value, but about the values we will *discover*. Taylor asserts that through accepting the biocentric outlook and being open to the uniqueness of individual non-human organisms, we will also discover their intrinsic value. Callicott's foundational transition is parallel. He asserts that when we comprehend insights of ecological science – and its conception of the natural world as a biotic community – our ethical dispositions will turn ecocentric simply in virtue of better matching our new perception of community.

In spite of these similarities, the conclusive maxims of Callicott and Taylor are sharply divergent. While Taylor applies the ecology-argument and concludes that only individuals can have intrinsic value, the land ethic takes the same road and ends with ethical holism. The difference lies in what we might call a *foundational move* – the argument by which a phenomenon becomes the foundation of a

theory. Ecological insights are central to both biocentrism and ecocentrism, but the way they are linked to ethical principles are different. Callicott's foundational move is the implication of a Darwinian evolutionary theory about how ethical dispositions take form. This insight allows him to say that insofar as ecology's insights are accepted, we will evolve to incorporate them in our ethical dispositions. The only natural incorporation of these insights has the form of a land ethic in which the biotic community has intrinsic value by virtue of its relations. Taylor, on the other hand, links ecological insights with biocentric principles through the notion of organic teleology and the ability to step outside our own perspective. Since all living organisms are a center of life with an aim, or a meaning, and since we are capable of taking this meaning into account, we will discover that all living organisms have intrinsic value in themselves.

By applying a set of scientific insights as a starting point, and linking them with accounts of how human beings and values are composed, Taylor and Callicott aim to avoid empty axiomatic philosophical assertions. They both see their own arguments as placing fixed intrinsic value in non-human nature, and conceive such an establishment of fixed values as vital for the future well-being of non-human nature.

The common project of Callicott and Taylor is to replace the prevailing ethical convictions with non-anthropocentric convictions. This ambition, however, is also shared by activists, politicians and concerned citizens of our societies. What distinguishes Taylor and Callicott's approach as environmental *foundationalism* is their attempt to replace our convictions by way of rational reconstruction of value, based on arguments that are not subject to opinion, human interests or subjective bias. In other words, they seek to tidy up the multifaceted debate about the location and distribution of value – a controversy of perspectives – with an *ultimate* perspective which settles the debate and provides basis for concrete prioritization. This project is the environmentalist version of philosophical foundationalism.

## 1.4 Environmental foundationalism without intrinsic value in nature

In spite of the non-anthropocentric dominance within environmental philosophy, there are some foundationalist contributions that retain an anthropocentric basis. As we will see, the scope of foundationalism is not limited to the re-distribution of intrinsic value. In complete opposition to the non-anthropocentric ethics of biocentrism and ecocentrism, Bryan Norton (2005) introduces the concept of “weak anthropocentrism” as a theory of environmental ethics that leaves human beings as the locus of intrinsic value. Norton agrees with non-anthropocentrists that human preferences cannot reasonably stand as the only measure of moral worth. However, instead of extending our ethics to non-human nature by asserting intrinsic value in nature, Norton proposes that we rather extend the *human locus* of value so that it includes both human preferences and human *ideals*. In this view, we can assess the moral worth of actions on the basis of whether it is in accord with “the ideals which exist as elements in a worldview essential to determinations of considered preferences” (Norton 2005:83). Thus, while non-human nature is left only with instrumental value, its value can be instrumental both to human preferences, say to our desire to eat meat, and to an ideal, for example, of living in harmony with nature (Norton 2005:83). Maintaining that weak anthropocentrism can fill the same ethical role as non-anthropocentrism, granted that we take human ideals and interests to be sufficiently long and broad, Norton argues that weak anthropocentrism is a more attractive philosophical position, since it avoids the complications of grounding the intrinsic value of non-human nature (Norton 2005:86).

Norton seems to embrace what Routley denounced as human chauvinism, albeit expanding its contents. At first glance, his approach to environmental values is in stark opposition to that of Taylor and Callicott, as he takes non-human intrinsic value out of the equation. However, the intrinsicality of nature’s value is based, both in Leopold’s and Taylor’s views, on the adoption a certain worldview in

which natural objects, be it individual organisms or biotic communities, would be conceived as valuable in themselves. Norton points out that value can be determined by human worldviews, and there is nothing in his theory to suggest that this does not pertain to an *ecological* worldview. Rather, what Callicott and Taylor would call intrinsic or inherent value might coincide well with what Norton would call value by virtue of *supporting an ecological worldview*. For him, Taylor's intrinsic nature is simply value that is instrumental to the intrinsically valuable ideals of a given worldview.

Therefore, it seems that Norton manages to avoid the conceptual need for a new foundation of environmental ethics, while still meeting the requirement of providing an environmental ethic. He reframes the notion of value in nature to incorporate Routley's demand to base ethics on something else than human desires and preferences, but without trying to ground it in *non-human* desires and preferences. His theory is philosophically anthropocentric, but practically open-ended, since non-human nature is still prone to value-ascription with support from various worldviews. The logic of the argument resembles that of Callicott, whose "descriptive" approach to ethics makes a point of the tendency of today's societies to be ethically engaged with non-human nature. Callicott appears to be saying that, given the adaptive nature of our ethical dispositions, the ecological worldview of today brings about intrinsic value in nature. Likewise, Norton could say that given the ecological worldview of today, and given the view that we should live in harmony with nature, non-human nature has value beyond our human desires and preferences. True, they depend on that particular (or some other) worldview for that value, but so does the intrinsic value upheld by Callicott, since his argument – the foundational move – depends on it. Callicott's intrinsic value is only intrinsic insofar as it is intrinsic *to someone*. To Norton, this implies that it is this *someone* that carries intrinsic value, not the object that this someone values. As long as an object has value *to* something, then it is only this last something, the last point of the value-chain, that has value intrinsically.

Accordingly, the difference between Taylor's and Callicott's non-anthropocentrism and Norton's anthropocentrism seems to be a matter of definitions rather than of substance. Norton's point is that his own way of defining value in nature is less demanding, and less philosophically complicated. The principle of theoretical parsimony leads Norton to favor the theory with the simplest and the fewest assumptions. However, the assumptions that Norton refutes are outnumbered by the ones he *shares* with Taylor and Callicott. The basic assumptions of philosophical foundationalism are equally present in all three theories. The difference is that instead of grounding environmental ethics through intrinsic value in nature, Norton finds its final justification in the intrinsic value of *human ideals*. However, both non-anthropocentrism and Norton's weak anthropocentrism are grounded in a revision of intrinsic value. Taylor, Callicott and Norton all approach the field by redefining value in ways that incorporate non-human nature in our ethical dispositions. Although they offer quite different arguments for their theories, all three apply a foundationalist strategy to construe their environmental philosophy: They approach the environmental crisis by attempting to ground values in nature. As such, they express the foundationalist philosopher's urge to do what ordinary people, politicians or activists cannot: To discover the perspective free locus of intrinsic value, so that we can make our environmental prioritization on solid, universal ground.

In spite of their philosophical disagreements, these philosophers are all part of the foundationalist discourse on the environment. A basic premise of this discourse is the idea that the value of nature is something that philosophers can *discover* through rational reconstruction or argumentative reasoning. Following this premise, environmental foundationalists find it natural to treat values (in nature or otherwise) as an attribute that depends on philosophical justification. This is the logic behind Norton's main argument: Revising anthropocentrism is preferable to replacing it with non-anthropocentrism, not because it is far from our current convictions, but because the philosophical grounding of non-anthropocentrism is philosophically complicated. This illustrates how the



preferability of a given ethical position is more or less unrelated to our established convictions and outlooks, and ultimately connected to the rules of justification and argument within the philosophical discourse. The question is not what we could agree on as a society, but for what we can provide the most solid philosophical foundation.

## 1.5 The self-image of environmental foundationalism

These attempts to answer Routley's call for an environmental ethic, spanning from the late 70's to the early 90's, have certain common presuppositions that pervade the decade-long dispute within environmental philosophy. They share conceptions about what philosophy is, and in particular what role philosophy can play in our attempts to face the growing environmental challenges. The environmental foundationalist takes on the job of grounding the right values in the environmental debate through connecting these values to one or another metaethical or metaphysical axiom. This practice of value-grounding assumes a perspective-free access to the domain of moral value. These philosophers thus reaffirm the traditional role of the foundationalist philosopher, not merely through the application of philosophical arguments, but through a particular way of conceiving and approaching the problem at hand. The philosophical perception of, and approach to, the new environmental problem can arguably be summarized as follows:

As environmental concerns become part of the public debate, philosophers acknowledge the problem, and start deliberating on how their own discipline can contribute. Since technical and political solutions are already available, but not popular, philosophers have an intuition that their own role in this must be one of providing philosophical backup to these solutions. These philosophers think that the best way to offer philosophical backup to environmental solutions is to take environmental values to a deeper level through grounding them in metaethical or otherwise philosophical principles. They aim to offer a way *out* of the

controversy of conflicting perspectives and opinions. Presenting neat and clear descriptions of which entities among non-human nature have intrinsic value, they hope that their theories will be somehow transform people's opinion or common law. Arguably, however, the result of this approach to environmental issues is that the discourse of environmental foundationalism has become (with some exceptions) a continuous intra-disciplinary debate about the localization of value. Opposing philosophical theories and arguments are reflected in opposing environmentalist positions expressed through various "centrisms".

The practice of environmental foundationalism is based on the assumption that the truths and values that we embrace as a society have a "deeper level" which is prior and foundational to the contingent and shallow convictions that guide us in our daily, practical lives. This assumption amounts to what Kristian Bjørkdahl (2002) calls the *vertical gaze* of environmental ethics. Since Plato and his allegory of the cave, philosophers have taken the job of correcting our values and truths so as to align them with the *real* values and truths that are beyond the reach of ordinary people. Their aim is not merely to discover Truth and Goodness, but to enlighten the public and bring our opinions and convictions closer to the Truth and Morality that is available only to the privileged few. Although the environmental problem is, from the outset, a *practical* and *concrete* problem, environmental foundationalists aim to solve it by reference to the *ahistorical* and *unbiased* world of philosophical Truth. Perhaps it is this special access, and the assumption that such deep discoveries will move up the system and transform our convictions and practices, that amounts to the immodest self-image among certain environmental philosophers:

So who can lift the world out of the environmental crisis? Everybody has to do what they can, but the most important and fundamental job falls to us philosophers. It is our job to dig up, expose to view, and subject to criticism the flawed ideas about the nature of nature, human nature, and the proper relationship between humans and nature that we have inherited from the past. [...] Being a world saver is a hard job. (Callicott 2010: 34-35)

There is no doubt about the commitment of Callicott and his fellow world savers. The question is, however, if their efforts have had the consequences they intended. Since the common presuppositions of environmental foundationalism leave room for different philosophical ideas and principles, different philosophers end at different conclusions on the question of values in non-human nature. As a consequence, the debate within environmental philosophy has tended to revolve around philosophical disagreements about where to place intrinsic value – whether it is in animals, ecosystems, parasites or in humans only. Arguably, a branch of philosophy which started with the ambition to contribute to society's solution of environmental challenges has grown into a scholastic practice from which society has difficulties to profit on a practical level. The situation within this branch of environmental ethics thus conforms to John Dewey's description of "ethical theory":

Ethical theory ever since has been singularly hypnotized by the notion that its business is to discover some final end or good or some ultimate and supreme law. This is the common element among the diversity of theories. [...] They have been able to dispute with one another only because of their common premise (Dewey 2004: 92-93)

Like the theories that Dewey is criticizing, the various theories of environmental ethics have been chasing the one, final, intrinsic value in (or outside) nature, in order to supply us with the necessary foundations for univocal value judgments in environmental issues. Although such foundations have been suggested in many variations, environmental philosophy has – so far at least – failed to provide a unanimous philosophical position. This lack of unanimity may seem natural and insignificant, but poses a significant threat to a discipline which aims to overcome limitations of perspective. It challenges an axiom of environmental foundationalism – the assumption that there is a final answer to the question of value in nature.

There are few indications that these philosophical platforms have made any significant contributions to the practical solution of environmental challenges. Arguably, this is partly due to the scholastic character of the texts in which they

are presented, as most such contributions seem to be written for a philosophically trained audience. The aim of contribution to the practical problem of the environment has become secondary to the aim of establishing philosophical consensus. The lack of philosophical influence on our practices, therefore, does not indicate a lack of environmental interest and concern in the public. An interest in environmental issues or environmental ethics does not, after all, necessarily involve an interest in philosophical propositions about intrinsic values in nature.

## 1.6 A carte du jour of intrinsic values

This chapter began with Richard Routley's call for a new, environmental ethic that would be better suited to cope with the growing challenges of the planet's resources and well-being. Forty years after his essay, much have changed in the social and political world, both generally and environmentally. Technology has offered solutions to many issues, and climate change has been put on the political agenda. Environmental foundationalists are still concerned with Routley's challenge and his way of framing the problem<sup>3</sup>. The reason for this may be that philosophers agree with Routley on what a philosopher is, and on what a philosopher should spend her time doing. That may explain why the philosophical discourse on the environment, in spite of considerable changes in society, has *not* changed. From the perspective of philosophical foundationalism, philosophy is not *parallel* to technology, politics and public opinion, but *foundational* to it. They precede it, because they have the foundational and timeless advantage of an ahistorical perspective. The classical ahistorical endeavor in environmental ethics has been that of establishing an intrinsic value in nature, independent of perspective, political change and social circumstance, which can stand as an irreducible ground upon which our actions may always be

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<sup>3</sup> See Samuelsson (2010); McShane (2007)

evaluated. Norton's anthropocentric break with this position is a break only with the concrete principle applied to provide the demanded "new ethic". The similarities outnumber the differences. The task is to ground values in nature, and this is still done by reference to an intrinsically valuable entity. A foundation is provided. The philosophers aim beyond the perspective of socially integrated human beings, beneath mere opinion, and into the perspective free, ahistorical domain of philosophical insight.

Foundationalist philosophy aims to be foundational in two ways: First, it approaches its problems by going beyond practice and backing it up with philosophical authority. Second, it does this by asserting claims that are universal due to their "grounding" in universal insights about the world, human beings, or the real nature of nature. Applied philosophy grounds practice, and theoretical philosophy grounds applied philosophy. Foundationalist philosophy aims to work as a bridge between the eternal world of ideas, and the concrete problems of today's society. In the case of environmental foundationalism, the bridge fails to reach the mainland.

The perpetual theoretical level of the debate suggests that environmental foundationalism is far from attaining a solution to Routley's challenge. The debate seems to have stagnated in the dead-end between common assumptions about philosophy and divergent intuitions about the nature of value and the value of nature. It has become a dead-end because the philosophers do not treat their intuitions as intuitions, but rather as truths which, in the manner of new scientific discoveries, should be accepted by all literate and informed human beings. Like the ethical theories criticized by Dewey, the diversity of environmental theories share common presuppositions that allow them to bounce back and forth in a seemingly perpetual debate about which version is the right one.

It may also be the case that society's demand for what philosophers have aim to supply is decreasing. After all, foundationalists do charge a lot for their thoughts. They require a reader that is ready to value whatever is declared by the

philosopher to be intrinsically valuable. They require a reader that accepts philosophical authority without question, servilely acknowledging that the eternal and absolute is the arena for the few and privileged. It might be that most readers read not in order to discover the one Truth, but in order to experience other peoples' perspectives on various subject matters, such as how we value or might value nature.

In any case, the foundationalist approach appears to have had little of the intended effect on our shared convictions and practices. Arguably, the desire to go beneath and beyond the concreteness, contextuality and practical frameworks of our convictions, in order to change our practices, is an attempt to *change practice by intentionally disregarding it*. The abstract principles and universal arguments seem largely out of tune with the common convictions of our societies. This might be because people tend to be motivated by other kinds of sentences than philosophical ones, or simply because people tend not to read philosophical dissertations and articles. It might also be because people do not attribute to philosophers the authority and special access which they claim. The idea that an ethical system, discovered in the depths of philosophical inquiry, will transform our patterns of actions by itself seems outmoded and unrealistic.

The image of a deeper, philosophical level of value and insight is the common assumption and driving force behind environmental foundationalism. As it turns out, this image seems to lead its subscribers in directions which do not serve their announced purposes. I suggest, therefore, that we leave this image behind. The remaining chapters of this thesis constitute an attempt to approach environmental ethics in terms of a non-hierarchical and anti-foundationalist perspective on knowledge, truth and morality. The following chapter opens with a discussion of a previous attempt to do just that, that of the anti-foundationalist perspective of *environmental pragmatism*.

## 2. Anti-foundationalism and environmental ethics

### 2.1 Introduction

The critical points raised in the preceding chapter are not new to environmental ethics. The core of foundational environmental ethics has been forcefully challenged by proponents of *environmental pragmatism*. They offer a forceful critique of theorized and foundationalist environmental ethics on the grounds that its debates have become “intramural” and void of practical impact. As pragmatists, they take as the first demand to environmental ethics that it addresses the environmental crisis on a practical, problem solving level. Suggesting that theoretical dogmatism is part of the problem rather than the solution, the environmental pragmatists seek an anti-foundationalist perspective on environmental ethics, and as such comprise a countermovement to the attempt to ground an environmental ethic in the concept of intrinsic value. In this chapter, I discuss the extent to which environmental pragmatism’s perspective breaks with the assumptions and tendencies of environmental foundationalism.

The core argument of environmental pragmatism is that the foundationalist ambitions of environmental ethics delay the philosophical contribution to practical environmental solutions. This point amounts to a *practical* argument about how the discipline should best approach its aims. However, notable proponents of environmental pragmatism approach environmental ethics not only from a practical viewpoint, but also from a distinctively philosophical viewpoint. They argue substantively against the distinction between instrumental and intrinsic value, and reject the idea of establishing a particular “centrism”. As pragmatists, they emphasize the role of human experience in value formation. And according to environmental pragmatism, experience shows us that all value is interconnected with other values in a given context. Thus, there is no room for

one particular ethical intrinsic core to which other values might be instrumental. Through this insight, the environmental pragmatists substitute a theory of “multicentric pluralism” for the hierarchy of values within any given environmental “centrism”. From this perspective, the interrelations between human beings and other entities are an ontological precondition of our existence. Accordingly, the notion of the special, intrinsic value of certain entities is considered misguided. In its place, environmental pragmatists conceive the various *relationships of our experience* as bearers of value, since they are necessary constituents and preconditions of whatever entity we might value. Accordingly, environmental pragmatism offers an environmental ethic which ascribes value in nature, not by virtue of a special feature of certain entities, but by virtue of the interrelatedness of *all* entities.

I argue that this perspective amounts to a theory which differs from environmental foundationalism in substance, but not in form. The metaphysical accounts of value borrowed from classical pragmatism amount to a “ground” for value in nature, and thereby a foundation for environmental ethics. Although the intention of these writers is to overcome the stagnation and scholasticism by returning to environmental practice, their arguments and conclusions fail to evade the language of foundationalism. They break with the monism of environmental centrism, but not with the foundationalist approach of environmental foundationalism. Accordingly, environmental pragmatism relapses into the philosophical debate as merely another theoretical position.

In this chapter, therefore, I turn to the writings of Richard Rorty for a perspective which breaks not only with moral monism, but with the whole discourse of foundationalist philosophy. While the environmental pragmatists reject moral monism and the distinction between intrinsicity and instrumentality, Rorty abandons the idea of theorizing value all together. Where environmental pragmatism retains the idea of value as something philosophers must sort out, Rorty’s anti-foundationalism leaves us no such sorting out to do, since it



abandons the idea of a foundational layer of value beneath the normative judgments of socially integrated human beings in a given context.

From a Rortyan perspective, environmental ethics cannot reach *beyond* our vocabularies on the environment, since there is no vocabulary that is not just *another* vocabulary, with its own rules and standards of objectivity. Inasmuch as philosophers, be it foundationalists or pragmatists, aim at providing a general theory about values in order to underwrite or debunk evaluative claims, they mistake their own, contingent vocabulary for a privileged access to something that is “really out there”. An environmental anti-foundationalism would lead us away from the goal of discovering, sorting out and grounding values in nature. From this viewpoint, environmental pragmatism is not anti-foundationalist. I argue that its break with traditional foundationalism rather consists of substituting a *different* set of philosophical foundations. Rorty’s anti-foundationalism, on the other hand, opens up for a new, non-hierarchical way of approaching the topic of environmental ethics, one which might help us out of the discursive dead-lock.

This chapter introduces the basic ideas of Rorty’s *epistemological behaviorism*, which amount to a perspective from which environmental foundationalism and environmental pragmatism are discussed. I do not offer a philosophical defense of Rorty’s writings, in the sense of arguing that they are sounder, more objective or more justified than their counterpart. Rather, I treat them as a new perspective which might take us in other, more fruitful directions. Rorty’s anti-foundationalism is not a set of arguments that can be debated within the framework of foundationalism, but an attempt to abandon this very framework. The value of Rorty’s ideas is not considered in terms of their philosophical justification, but of their ability to suggest a more useful perspective on environmental ethics than that of environmental foundationalism and environmental pragmatism. Whether they can is the question of the entirety of this thesis. This chapter addresses that question by discussing the Rortyan break with the ideas which have not worked so far – the assumptions of philosophical

foundationalism. Taking this perspective into account, this chapter offers a Rortyan critique of the prevalent directions of environmental ethics.

## 2.2 Environmental pragmatism and anti-foundationalism

The pragmatist perspective on environmental ethics has gradually formed into a distinct alternative to the mainstream thinking of non-anthropocentrism. In 1996, Andrew Light and Erik Katz published their work *Environmental Pragmatism*, an anthology of texts constituting a new, pragmatic, perspective on environmental ethics. The impetus of this publication is the realization that although environmental philosophy has offered thorough theories of environmental value and our responsibility to nature, it seems to have had very little practical effect on practice and environmental policy. Light and Katz propose that in order to elevate its work from the philosophical institutes, environmental ethics must give up the search for philosophical certainty about values in nature, and redirect its attention towards specific and practical “problems of humanity’s relationship with the environment” (Light & Katz 1996:2).

The anthology includes, and is partly inspired by, Anthony Weston’s paper “Beyond Intrinsic Value – Pragmatism in Environmental Ethics” (1996). In this paper, environmental ethics is conceived of as stymied in the pursuit of philosophical consensus on intrinsic value, and therefore incapable of contributing to practical solutions. Weston confronts the tendency in environmental ethics to “ground” environmental values by providing special justification to intrinsic value in nature. He argues that environmental ethics has adapted a highly specific and demanding notion of intrinsic value, carrying with it metaphysical abstractions and requirements of special justification to the degree that “non-anthropocentric environmental ethics may simply be impossible” (Weston 1996:291). As a starting point for environmental pragmatism, this practical concern about the efforts of environmental ethics has inspired a number of pragmatists to contribute to the field.

### 2.2.1 Pragmatism and the nature of value

Anthony Weston is skeptical not only to intrinsic value in nature, but to the concept of intrinsic value as a whole. Adapting Dewey's holistic value theory, he rejects the philosophical necessity of "final goods" towards which instrumental values must always aim. To Weston, all value is instrumentally connected in a "weblike way", each value justifiable by reference to other values (Weston 1996:293). In contradiction to theories of intrinsic value, this perspective conceives justification as circular. There is no ultimate, final reference value from which other values can achieve validity. According to Weston, the justification of a given value is about revealing "its organic place among our others" (1996:293), and so cannot be obtained by reference to some particular absolute value. Citing Dewey that the idea of something having value intrinsically is a groundless misinterpretation, Weston refutes the basic intuition of foundationalist environmental ethics as a misunderstanding of the concept of value.

The rejection of intrinsic value makes the interconnectedness of value central to environmental pragmatism. Seemingly, this move lets Weston avoid the necessity of grounding value in nature, what Norton conceived of as an unnecessary philosophical detour. The difference between the two, however, is that Weston's pragmatic argument does not merely exclude intrinsic value from non-human nature, but refutes the whole concept. Thus, while Norton depends on the intrinsic value of human beings as end-value for his theory of value in nature to work, Weston's perspective contains no end-value foundation whatsoever. All value, that of human beings included, depends on its relationships with other entities and values.

To reject the concept of intrinsic value is not merely to refute a value category. To Weston, it implies the positive affirmation of the instrumental, or interconnected, nature of *all* value. This *redefinition* of value is the basis for the contribution of pragmatism to environmental philosophy. All things that have

value, be it a human being or an ecosystem, do so by virtue of them being connected with other entities and values. As Weston notes in the abstract of his article,

It becomes easy to justify respect for other life forms and concern for the natural environment, and indeed many of the standard arguments only become stronger, once the demand to establish intrinsic value is removed (Weston 1985: 321)

Weston's rejection of intrinsic value leaves him in a position to emphasize the essentially interdependent structure of values, an interdependency that devaluates any given "centrism" in environmental philosophy: if there cannot be one particular entity or group which holds intrinsic value, than *no* particular entity or group can have special ethical status. In other words, Weston's effort to establish a non-anthropocentrism is based, not on a special value in nature, but on the absence of a special value in any entity.

### **2.2.2 Pragmatism and the value of nature**

Weston's refusal of a stable hierarchy of values renders the foundationalist project of *localizing* value in some particular feature of nature irrelevant. Instead, environmental pragmatism embraces *moral plurism* as a metaethical position. Kelly Parker (1996: 32) takes the basic ideas of pragmatism to engender a moderate moral pluralism, in which different ethical situations involve different entities and different goods, not always apt for philosophical categorization. Parker explains:

[...] pluralism is a fact countered in experience. Value arises in a variety of relationships among differing parts of the experienced world. Each situation must be appraised on its own distinct terms (Parker 1996:33).

To paraphrase Parker and Weston, the interconnectedness of values is revealed to us in experience, and does not leave room for any particular "centrism". For Parker, this insight has implications for the role of environmental philosophers. As environmental ethicists, we are left with the task of balancing different goods and perspectives in each ethical situation, without being able to prioritize

between these on the basis on their intrinsic or instrumental value. As principles of priority, however, Parker proposes that we promote “the *sustainability* and *diversity* of experiences made possible by a course of action” (Parker 1996:32), whenever an ethical dilemma is faced.

Although value is conceived as anthropogenic (“anthropometric” is Parker’s term), the focus on human experience does not make environmental pragmatism an *anthropocentric* ethic. Pragmatism is ethically *pluralist*, given the openness to the points of view and ethical loci in a given situation. The emphasis on human experience in environmental pragmatism springs from the idea that, although human experience is not the only locus of value, we cannot value that which we do not experience. According to Parker, therefore, value arises in the *relationships* of the experienced world (1996:33).

According to Sandra B. Rosenthal and Rogene A. Buchholz (1996), this insight implies that pragmatism *is* an environmental ethic. Drawing on Dewey’s thoughts about experience, they argue that human beings are ecologically connected with the biological and cultural world, and that our development and growth involves a “deepening and expansion of perspective to include ever widening horizons of the cultural and natural worlds” (Rosenthal & Buchholz 1996:42). Since all parts of nature can constitute relational contexts of value, and since experience of value is about the “value ladenness of relational context within nature”, value in nature exists wherever our valuable experiences emerge or may emerge in a natural context (Rosenthal & Buchholz 1996:43). We cannot detach value *in* human beings from value *in* the environment, because it arises *in the relation* between the two, and never in the human subject alone. By conceiving value as an “emergent contextual property of situations” (Rosenthal & Buchholz 1996: 44), Rosenthal and Buchholz seem to have established a *new locus* of the environmental ethic: Rather than locating value in natural entities or systems, like Taylor and Callicott, or in human beings, like Norton, pragmatism locates value *in the relations* between human beings and their environment. This conception undercuts the division between objects of intrinsic and instrumental value,

because all value arises in the relations between such objects, and not *in* any particular one of them. To Rosenthal and Buchholz, pragmatism is by itself an environmental ethic, because it regards human beings as always interconnected with their environment, and value as a property of these interconnections.

In the above section I have described a line of thought which begins with the observation of practical impotence in environmental ethics and a rejection of the foundationalist project, and which ends with the establishment of a new locus of environmental value and thereby a new foundation for environmental ethics. The starting point of the environmental pragmatists is pragmatic: They perceive environmental philosophy to be disconnected from practice and overtly theorized as a discipline. They apply the pragmatic principle of directing the question “what difference does it make” towards the notion of intrinsic value, a concept that seemingly blocks the road for philosophy’s practical contribution. Up to this point, the environmental pragmatists maintain the practical, non-foundationalist perspective.

However, when they reject the concept of intrinsic value in favor of pragmatic concept of value, it is not because the former makes no practical difference, but because they support a pragmatic *theory of value*. Using this theory of value, they argue that every value and act of valuation emerges in the interconnectedness of objects in a particular situation. Thus, values are located in the *relationship* rather than in the objects. In other words, the value of a human being is always simultaneously the value of the environment to which the human being is related. It seems, therefore, that by construing pragmatism as an environmental ethic, Rosenthal and Buchholz have answered Routley’s call, and delivered their own version of the new, environmental ethic.

In fact, their version of an environmental ethic is arguably not significantly different from some of those discussed in the first chapter, where natural entities are ascribed intrinsic value on account of them being constitutive of the ecosystem. The novelty of Rosenthal and Buchholz’ theory consists in the relational

(rather than intrinsic) nature of the value in nature. Consequently, we may conceive this branch of environmental pragmatism as a *version* of foundationalist environmental ethics, rather than a break with it. The main foundationalist features that we saw in the first chapter are indeed present: A particular *locus of value* (relations in experienced nature) is backed up by a particular philosophical conception of what value, and nature, *really is*. The localization of value grounds an environmental ethic.

From this perspective, Rosenthal and Buchholz share the self-image of the foundationalists: As philosophers, they aim to reach beyond mere perspective and contingent convictions, and discover the *real* value of nature. The role of environmental philosophers is to apply this knowledge to inform the public that nature really has value. With its passage from a practical starting point to axiomatic theory, environmental pragmatism resembles the very beginning of environmental ethics itself: Where Routley called for a solution to the environmental problem, Weston, Light and Katz call for a refocusing of environmental ethics towards the actual problem. And where Callicott, Taylor, Norton et.al respond by taking the environmental problem safely into the corridors of philosophy departments, Rosenthal and Buchholz foster this isolation by offering new theories and new foundations.

It appears that although the environmental pragmatists have abandoned the project of establishing a “centrism”, they have not abandoned the ambitions of foundationalist philosophy. They share with foundationalist philosophers the assumption that philosophy can tell us something general about what human beings and values *really are*, and what this implies for our practices. Their distance from foundationalist philosophy does not concern the scope of philosophy, but amounts to a disagreement of which philosophical theory should be applied. Environmental pragmatism rejects the assumption that there are certain morally prior intrinsic values out there, and substitutes a theory that there are *no* such morally prior intrinsic values, only a web of interconnected values. The connection, however, between the metaethical value-theory and the ethical

implications professed is quite similar in both cases. Where foundationalist ethicists construe the intrinsic value of a given entity as foundational for environmentally ethical practice, the environmental pragmatists' conception of value's relational character serves the same purpose. Environmental foundationalism tells us that there is inherent value in nature, and environmental pragmatism tells us that there is value spread across the context and environment of all our actions.

In these sections I have offered a description of environmental pragmatism in light of its motives and the consequences of its philosophical conceptions. Although the inspiration of environmental pragmatism is a reaction to the foundationalist self-conception within environmental ethics, we have seen that its counterarguments are directed to the particular foundations rather than at the way of practicing environmental ethics. Rather than offering an anti-foundationalist approach to environmental ethics, the environmental pragmatists propose an *anti-monist* argument in the debate. Refusing to ground the value of *some* natural entities by virtue of a concept *intrinsic* value, environmental pragmatism grounds the value of *all* natural entities by virtue of a pluralist conception of *interconnected* value. The difference from foundationalism is not primarily about foundationalist presumptions, but the tendency to take one particular part of nature as its starting point. Metaphysical pluralism of values is still metaphysics.

Environmental pragmatism fails to break free of the philosophical stagnation and isolation for which they criticize environmental ethics. It breaks with certain metaethical principles and their moral consequences, but not with the idea of construing metaethics as a foundation for moral consequences. This thesis aims for a perspective on environmental ethics which breaks not only with certain theories, but with the entire idea that a theory of value can provide an answer as to whether we should care about the environment. In the following, I turn to the anti-foundationalist writings of Richard Rorty for a perspective that may help us abandon the language of environmental foundationalism.



## 2.3 Richard Rorty's anti-foundationalism

The decade that saw the emergence of foundationalist environmental philosophy also saw the publication of Richard Rorty's anti-representationalist magnum opus, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979). In this book, Rorty frames the self-image of philosophy as that of a "tribunal of pure reason, upholding the claims of the rest of the culture" (Rorty 1979:4). To Rorty, the history of philosophy constitutes an attempt to replace religion as the domain in society where one "touched bottom", and thus where the foundations of all other intellectual life could be discovered. Rorty conceives of traditional philosophy as a discipline with a foundational mandate: Through the discussion of eternal and inevitable problems, philosophy's role is to endorse or debunk knowledge claims within science, religion and the humanities. As such, philosophy occupies a special and foundational position in society, positing a deeper and more primary insight than that of other disciplines. On the self-image of philosophy, Rorty comments:

[...] it understands the foundations of knowledge, and it finds these foundations in the study of man-as-knower, of the "mental processes" or the "activity of representation" which make knowledge possible (Rorty 1979:3).

Thus, while various different disciplines advance a diversity of different truths, these statements are all subject to, and dependent upon, a philosophical theory of *what it really is* for a statement to be true. In other words, they depend on a theory of knowledge. Since knowledge, on this view, is identical with accurate representation of the world, a theory of knowledge is identical with a theory of representation (Rorty 1979:3). Accordingly, philosophy's conceived role in society is to offer a general theory of representation that allows us to "divide culture up into the areas which represent reality well, those which represent it less well, and those which do not represent it at all" (Rorty 1979:3).

To Rorty, this picture of philosophy has its sources in the writings of Descartes, and Kant. The foundationalist self-image of philosophy originates in the coupling

of the Cartesian idea about absolute truth through introspection with Kant's idea that this truth shapes the possibilities of empirical knowledge (Rorty 1979:8-9). Taken together, these ideas create an arena for philosophy to occupy in which *a priori* truths, independent and prior to scientific knowledge, comprise the subject matter. Although he observes that the particular foundations embraced by philosophers have changed over the last centuries, Rorty maintains that the philosophical self-image has been persistent. The philosophical attempt to "escape from history" prevails, as philosophers are still working to provide eternal and universal foundations for our knowledge (Rorty 1979:3, 8-9).

It is precisely this escape from history that Rorty wants to reverse. In this section, I will present Rorty's perspective on philosophy and its foundationalist self-image, and offer a Rortyan critique of environmental foundationalism. If we take his perspective, the project of foundationalist environmental ethics appears as an outmoded and uninteresting project, preoccupied with achieving consensus within its own vocabulary.

### **2.3.1 From representation to conversation**

To Richard Rorty, philosophy's self-image as foundational to society is traceable back to some fundamental concepts and assumptions in the history of philosophy. He conceives of modern epistemology as a result of the effort to establish philosophy as a unique discipline with its own subject in the study of knowledge. The core of epistemological philosophy is the assumption that at their best, our minds, thoughts and utterances are capable of *mirroring* nature. It is this representational gateway between our practical coping and the "real" world that gives philosophy its *raison d'être*, and which establishes philosophy as foundational to other disciplines. Since philosophy understands the foundations of knowledge and the activity of representation, it has a position from which knowledge claims from other disciplines are prone to affirmation or deflation (Rorty 1979: 3). All knowledge is subject to a *general theory of knowledge*, since such a theory sets out to determine what counts as knowledge. Analogously, all

values and ethical convictions are subject to a general theory of goodness which transcends expressions of contingent norms and egoistic purposes, and discover what it *really is* for something to be good or right (Rorty 1998a:171). Rorty gives Kant much of the credit for the philosophical foundationalism of the past centuries, inasmuch as he (1) provided philosophy with a priori certainty, (2) distinguished philosophy as a foundational science with access to the “formal” features of human life and (3) grounded morality in epistemology rather than in metaphysics. In short, Kant established for philosophers the position of a tribunal of pure reason from which all other human perspectives can be objectively measured (Rorty 1979: 139). This foundationalist self-image, writes Rorty, has been hard to shake off:

[...] most philosophers have remained Kantian. Even when they claim to have “gone beyond” epistemology, they have agreed that philosophy is a discipline which takes as its study the “formal” or “structural” aspects of our beliefs, and that by examining these the philosopher serves the cultural function of keeping the other disciplines honest, limiting their claims to what can be properly “grounded”. (Rorty 1979:163)

Epistemological philosophy and its foundational self-image are ultimately connected to the idea of accurate representation of the world, subscribing to the conception of knowledge as “mirroring” nature. In order to maintain its foundational position amongst other disciplines through “rational reconstruction” of knowledge, philosophy depends on a division between *the contingent* and the *necessary*. The idea of necessity is linked to the assumption that rationality, knowledge and morality are constrained by ahistorical rules (whether in the form of metaphysical objects or of transcendental principles) that are discoverable by philosophy as a universal framework for human actions and beliefs (Rorty 1982:164-165). The distinction between the necessary and the contingent is parallel to that between “the given” and that which is “added by the mind”, and marks the line between science as the study of content; and philosophy as the study of formal epistemological structure – of how we come to know things (Rorty 1979:169,170). Epistemology accordingly puts philosophy in the position

to determine what we “may say”. If our assertions are justified by reference to accuracy of representation, and if philosophy has epistemological authority as the discipline that understands representation, then the justification of our assertions depends on philosophy.

To Rorty, the attempt to find a point outside the web of beliefs, words or actions with which our assertions might correspond expresses what he calls “*the philosophical urge*” – the desire to escape the contingency of current practices, beliefs and morality, and reach the absolute bottom point of knowledge, the ahistorical and necessary constant in a world of contingency and change (Rorty 1982:165). His *epistemological behaviorism*, however, inverts the picture. Drawing on Quine, Sellars and Wittgenstein, Rorty suggests that we see the acquisition of knowledge not as learning to represent the world correctly, but as learning the rules of a *language game*. If one accepts this perspective and see language, rather than experience, as the frame of knowledge, one will see justification as *social* rather than epistemological (Rorty 1979:170).

Rather than perceiving epistemology as determining the justification of our social practices, this view frames epistemology’s assertions as dependent on what society lets *it* say. Epistemological behaviorism reinterprets the discipline of epistemology as “just the study of certain ways in which human beings interact” (Rorty 1979:175). Consequently, its concepts are reinterpreted as matters of social justification: The *certainty* of a statement is no longer a matter of accuracy of representation, but rather of social consent to its contents, and the *necessity* of a truth is simply an affirmation that no interesting alternatives have been voiced. Rorty sums up his perspective as follows:

It is merely to say that nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and that there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence. (Rorty 1979:178)

Rorty’s epistemological behaviorism is not a *theoretical alternative* to correspondence theory, and neither is it an *attack* on its basic concepts. It is simply the suggestion that we try to resist this urge, and refrain from looking for

justification outside society. Justification within society is still justification, and words like “true”, “certain” and “necessary” can still have meaning. However, these concepts are no more profound or foundational than other words. If we accept that justification is social, and that obtaining knowledge is about learning the rules of a language game, the concept of “grounding” becomes uninteresting. The grounding of some truth or value usually refers to giving it an objective status and thereby removing it from the domain of mere opinion. Rorty writes, on the concept of objectivity:

[It] should be seen as conformity to the norms of justification (for assertions and for actions) we find about us [...] and it becomes dubious and self-deceptive only when seen as something more than this – namely, as a way of obtaining access to something which “grounds” current practices in something else. Such a “ground” is thought to need no justification, because it has become so clearly and distinctly perceived as to count as a “philosophical justification”. (Rorty 1979:361)

The basic point for Rorty is that attempts to ground assertions, whether metaphysically or epistemologically, are never more than just another set of descriptions. What we conceive of as objective is simply what we currently agree to. To perceive objective inquiry as ahistorical grounding is mistaking the normal (what we accept) for the necessary (what we just have to accept because it is True). Furthermore, it presumes the *commensurability* of all statements in a given discourse. That is, it presumes that all propositions across various discourses are subject to a set of rules which constitute a *common ground*, whether by virtue of a metaphysical conception of “what really exists”, or of necessities of “what it really is to contribute in a discourse”. Such common ground makes it possible to provide justification across and between discourses, independently of the social context in which they occur, and thereby to solve potential conflicts and disagreements with reference to the outside of the discourse (Rorty 1979:316-318).

Rorty suggests that we abandon this search for common ground and give up on commensurability all together. He proposes that we substitute *hermeneutics* for epistemology, and a conversational perspective on discourse for an

epistemological one. The conversational conception of discourse is one in which speakers converse in *hope* of reaching agreement. Rather than indicating the existence of some common ground, this hope is simply the hope by different speakers with different backgrounds that the conversation ends well, without discursive constraints “save conversational ones” (Rorty 1982:165). Rorty combines the conversational view of discourse with the holistic conception that we cannot understand the parts of a discourse, or of a society, without an understanding of the whole, and vice versa (Rorty 1979:319). In this conversational conception of society, the epistemological division between commensurable (objective knowledge) and incommensurable (subjective opinion) is reframed as a hermeneutical division between two kinds of conversation: “Normal discourse”, in which speakers share some basic assumptions about how and with what to contribute to the conversation, and “abnormal discourse”, which arises when a speaker contributes without familiarity with these assumptions (Rorty 1979:320).

In other words, Rorty reframes degree of objectivity, in all branches of society, as *degree of familiarity*. While epistemology conceives of society as a structure set on foundations, and agreement as possible by virtue of some common ground outside the given discourse, Rorty conceives of culture as a conversation in which agreement itself is the common ground. Nothing other than agreement within a vocabulary may constitute objectivity:

[...] there is no way to step outside the various vocabularies we have employed and find a metavocabulary which somehow takes account of *all possible* vocabularies, all possible ways of feeling and judging. (Rorty 1989: xvi)

The aim of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is to confront a tendency which Rorty conceives of as a potential threat to our cultures and societies. To him, the philosophical tendency to eternalize certain vocabularies as ahistorical and neutral vocabulary threatens to “freeze up” culture and consequently “dehumanize” us (Rorty 1979:377). He criticizes philosophy for constantly

approaching moral and existential questions with attempts to find new systematic objective truths that will stand as viable answers for all of time. Rorty writes:

Since the time of Kant, it has become more and more apparent for nonphilosophers that a really professional philosopher can supply a philosophical foundation for just about anything. This is one reason why philosophers have, in the course of our century, become increasingly isolated from the rest of culture. Our proposals to guarantee this and clarify that have come to strike our fellow-intellectuals as merely comic. (Rorty 1982:169)

In Rorty's view, the extent to which a philosopher is an interesting participant in a given discourse is not a consequence of her epistemological insight into the real meaning of truth, value or morality. Rather, it depends on her *familiarity* with the topic and its historical background, one that may or may not seem relevant and prove useful as a contribution to a particular discourse (Rorty 1979:393).

If it is the case that philosophers' substitution of foundations for familiarity plays a part in its inability to influence the public, it is arguably germane for the practice of environmental ethics in particular. In the subsequent section, I will reconsider the perspectives of environmental foundationalism and environmental pragmatism in the light of Rorty's anti-foundationalism. I argue that both environmental discourses construe their own contributions to the environmental discourse as "deeper" than non-philosophical contributions, and that neither breaks with the theorizing tendencies of foundationalist philosophy.

### **2.3.2 Rorty and environmental foundationalism**

From the perspective of epistemological behaviorism and its conception of philosophy, the environmental theories presented in this thesis provide solid examples of a kind of philosophy it is time to abandon. If we do not see philosophy as a gateway to a deeper and more objective access to morality and truth, and if we abandon the conception of perspectives and vocabularies as something we may *go beyond*, then the efforts of environmental foundationalists seem futile and misguided. What Callicott, Taylor, Norton and other foundationalist ethicists have in common is exactly the assumption that

philosophy *can* bring us neutral insights about value and morality, and that the contextuality of norms and values *can* be overcome in a philosophical voyage beyond mere convention. This is the basic assumption, embraced by all of these philosophers, of the call for philosophy to provide a new ethic, and thereby to rise above the controversy of values and opinions in the public environmental discourse.

Since such a new ethic cannot merely express the opinion of the philosopher, it is sought in objective inquiry into the concepts like value and human beings. As epistemologists (in the Rortyan sense), environmental foundationalists presuppose the *commensurability* of the various perspectives in the environmental debate, as well as their own unbiased access to the common ground to which these perspectives are subject. Just as epistemology presumes the dependency of knowledge on a philosophical *theory of knowledge*, environmental foundationalism presumes the dependency of environmental values on a philosophical *theory about environmental values*.

In their confrontational approach to environmental values, foundationalists fail to see the conversational and social character of justification and objectivity. To the extent that they reach the coveted objectivity, this merely expresses the extent to which their theories are coherent with the “normal discourse” of their audience, the discourse of environmental foundationalism. Accordingly, while statements like “nature has intrinsic value” may be more or less objective within the discipline of environment ethics, depending on their conformity to intra-discursive premises and assumptions, there is no universal reference point connecting the objectivity of this discourse to another, and thus to the public discourse of environmental debate.

From a Rortyan viewpoint, the best environmental ethics can do is to challenge the normal discourse by introducing new perspectives that may or may not eventually become part of normal discourse. An obvious obstacle to this is the tendency to conceive moral justification as dependent on philosophical theory



rather than on social consensus. In their effort to establish justification for environmental values, the environmental foundationalists apply philosophical principles and arguments that are conceived as needless of justification themselves. Their theories, as efforts to justify or debunk the values of society by reference to philosophical theory, are themselves not *socially* justified outside their academic discourse. The failure to see this, and assuming that society, but not philosophy, needs justification, leads environmental foundationalism into the pitfall of epistemological arrogance.

Another, related obstacle to the practical significance of environmental ethics is the fact that environmental foundationalists write as though other environmental philosophers were their intended audience. Although there are exceptions, most environmental foundationalists do not try to enter into conversation with the people whose practices they wish to change. On a hermeneutical conception of conversation, different parties converse with the hope of agreement. Environmental foundationalism, however, does not aim at such conversation, and thus has no reason to hope for broader agreement. In practice, the agreement sought by these philosophers is exclusively a philosophical one. Their conceived relation to the rest of culture is not conversational, but foundational. They do not seek to contribute to the conversation about environmental issues, but to go beneath it and thus to provide it with objectivity and certainty. In other words, environmental foundationalism seeks to inform our regular vocabularies with insights from a perspective free vocabulary of certainty and objectivity.

To Rorty, words like necessity, objectivity and certainty refer agreement *within* a discourse, and do not apply to vocabularies themselves. There is no common reference point *outside* these different vocabularies that may tell us which one of them is more certain, true or morally elevated. That is because concepts like “true”, “certain” and “morally elevated” are always related to the vocabulary in which they are used. Accordingly, there is no truth, meaning or value *outside* the discourses that discuss value in nature. The basic assumptions of environmental ethics do not express universal, undoubtable truths. Like other assumptions, they

are part of a vocabulary which is *contingent*, of a language which could have been completely different.

What environmental ethics could hope for is challenging the public discourse by offering abnormal descriptions, and hope that these would gradually move from discursive abnormalities to changes in normal discourse. This is exactly where environmental foundationalism fails. The case of foundationalist environmental ethics is a good example of how social justification works in practice: Environmental ethics may justify or assert this and that value, but as long as its principles and premises are not shared in our public vocabularies, it remains futile as a contribution to practical improvements.

### **2.3.3 Rorty and environmental pragmatism**

The Rortyan insistence on breaking with foundationalist philosophy is explicitly shared by the environmental pragmatists. As we have seen, they set out to re-focus environmental ethics towards the practical problems that motivated Routley's call for a new ethic, and away from the theorized debate that followed it. Their shift of focus is manifested in a rejection of the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value. This rejection, however, does not merely imply a pragmatic divorce from a concept which we have no use for, or from a term that complicates rather than ameliorates the debate. The environmental pragmatists seem to aim for a more substantial philosophical critique. They want to show us that there is *really* no such thing as an intrinsicity of values which distinguishes some values from others. They reject the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value by virtue of a metaphysical argument about the basic interconnectedness of human beings, nature, and value.

In refusing to ground natural values with a concept of intrinsic value (or its conceptual division from other value types), environmental pragmatism retains a new metaethical framework from which an environmental ethic may arise. They discover that the negation of ethical intrinsicity indicates a universal

instrumentality of values: If no value is absolute and on its own, then all value is interconnected with its value-environment of natural and human entities. When the environmental pragmatists argue that intrinsic value does not exist, that it is the same as instrumental value, or even that *all* value is intrinsic – they, too, are telling us what value *really is*. The fundamental relatedness of value becomes a foundation for the ethical consideration of all things that are connected with what we experience.

Rorty's anti-foundationalism, however, does not spring from insights about the wrongness of philosophical theories. It starts with the idea that if we conceive language as a tool rather than as a medium for mirroring reality, and knowledge as learning the rules of a given language, we will also conceive different languages, discourses, values and opinions as social phenomena rather than representational media. From this perspective, there is no point of view *outside* these languages and discourses, except from *another* language or discourse. Such an outside, a "view from nowhere", is what is needed in order to provide commensurability across different vocabularies, and thus in order for one vocabulary to be "foundational" to another. To be foundational in this sense means to be able to give universal, discourse-independent evidence from the outside, to values or opinions that are held on the inside. It implies the ability to see something "as it really is", extracted from all contingent beliefs, norms and conventions of regular discourse participants. To Rorty, this tendency is present in the writings of Plato, Kant, Habermas, and many other prominent philosophers. They see philosophy as in grasp of something universal and necessary, something with which one can disclose how things really are, or oblige *all* of mankind to a certain pattern of behavior. Environmental foundationalism shares this self-conception, and displays it in its attempts to solve the environmental problems by providing values to which we are *all* subject, or by proposing moral principles to which we would *all* consent if we act rationally. As for environmental pragmatism, although the imperative style is left out, the philosophical self-conception is the same. They seek to enlighten the

environmental debate by showing us how the world is really comprised, and what values really are. Rorty writes:

To drop the notion of the philosopher as knowing something about knowing which nobody else knows so well would be to drop the notion that his voice always has an overriding claim on the attention of the other participants in the conversation. (Rorty 1979: 392)

In the context of environmental ethics, this is the same as saying that philosophical statements about the intrinsicality, the interconnectedness or the pluralism of values are merely sets of descriptions capable of being accepted or rejected in the social contexts in which they are presented. The difference between such a philosophical statement and a statement such as “it is important to protect the environment”, is that the latter is *presented* as a statement, while the former are presented as necessary conditions to which such statements must subscribe in order to be justified. Thus, although we could consider environmental philosophy’s insights as contributions to a general discourse about the environment, such conversational contribution is not what it aims at. It aims at going beyond the conversation about the environment and resolving the debate by reference to its own, undebatable insights.

### **2.3.4 Rorty and the limits of philosophy**

Rorty’s break with epistemological philosophy is an attempt to abandon the self-conception of philosophy as a view from nowhere from which we may extract universal justification. His conversationalism leaves no special role for philosophy to occupy in society, since there is no privileged access to reality for it to retain. There is no view within a given discourse that can be given justification from the outside of that particular discourse. This does not imply, however, that every such view is as good as all other views. It implies that when opposed views in a discourse are confronted, we choose between them not by virtue of the philosophical principles to which they may conform, but by reference to their concrete and contextual advantages over each other (Rorty 1982:168).

Although it has been a frequent point of criticism, Rorty does not accept the charge of “relativism” and “subjectivism” as a characterization of his writings. To Rorty, these concepts presuppose the very philosophical dogmas he is trying to abandon. The distinctions between the subjective and objective opinions and values, between the finding and making of knowledge, between the relative and particular and the absolute and universal, are dichotomies which make sense within the vocabulary of metaphysics and epistemology, wherein there *is* something absolute that philosophers may discover and present as universal truths (Rorty 1999: xviii). Thus, the charge of relativism comes from *within* the very vocabulary which Rorty is asking that we stop using. As an *ethnocentrist*, acknowledging the inability to step outside of his own contingent vocabulary, Rorty cannot reply to such critique from any other place than within his own vocabulary, one within which these distinctions are abandoned.

In this vocabulary, the connection between our beliefs, values and norms with an “outer world”, is not a representational, but *causal* relation. An outspoken Darwinist, Rorty acknowledges that the values and beliefs we hold are instances of the process of adapting and adjusting to the contingencies of the world which we inhabit. On this naturalist conception of knowledge and language, human beings are “complicated animals” rather than elevated beings in power of representing the world independently of interests and contingent discourses (Rorty 1998a:48). Our language, accordingly, is not a medium for representation of the world out there, but rather a *tool* for the facilitation of this adjustment and adaption. Philosophical language is no exception.

Seeing language as tool use (Rorty 1999: xxiii) does not in itself rule out the potential significance of environmental ethics. Such ethics may be conceived simply as the attempt to provide a new vocabulary that better enables us to cope with some new features of the world we inhabit. The environmental philosophers, however, do not share this conversational description of what they do, and do not seek to offer a more efficient vocabulary. They seek to correct our values and beliefs towards conformity to principles, to a philosophical basis that should

serve as common ground for all views within the environmental discourse. They assume that customs, practices and norms of a particular society or discourse are subject to justification through the application of philosophical principles. With Rorty's view on justification as a social phenomenon, this assumption is turned around, as the general theories of philosophy turn dependent upon the beliefs and values within the society which it addresses. The refusal of environmental foundationalism to take part in the environmental conversation leaves them little space to influence our practices.

In this chapter, I have discussed some basic assumptions of environmental foundationalism and environmental pragmatism from the perspective of Richard Rorty's anti-foundationalism. Referring to Rorty's description of foundationalism as an attempt to dominate by virtue of philosophical authority, I have described environmental foundationalism as an attempt to circumvent public debate and difficult prioritization by grounding environmental values in unbiased philosophical principles. The assumption that our contingent values have a "real" counterpart on a deeper level, which can be discovered by way of rational reconstruction, becomes irrelevant if we conceive all vocabularies simply as vocabularies. If we do so, we might see that the interesting feature of the philosophical perspective on environmental ethics is not its special authority, but its failure to conceive itself as a discourse among other discourses.

If it is the case that the environmental crisis can be solved by changes in our values and ethical convictions, it seems that we must seek elsewhere for the required inspiration. The next chapter discusses the relation of theory to social change with reference to Rorty and Stanley Fish, among others. I argue that the Rortyan conception of social justification challenges the belief in theory as an engine of social change. Therefore, the last part of the next chapter turns to other genres for inspiration towards environmental values.

### 3. Environmental ethics after Rorty

#### 3.1 Introduction: Nominalism and historicism, criticism and change

If we take Rorty's anti-foundationalism into account, the task of attaining ethical and practical changes by way of philosophical foundations can be abandoned. This chapter is a discussion of how we can approach the matters of social change and moral progress *without* foundations.

If we say that learning the rules of a given language, instead of correctly representing reality in itself, is the best description of what it is to attain knowledge about something, we are also saying that the rules of truth and goodness lie *within* such a language, and that no there is no knowledge or morality to be found on the outside. The world is indeed "out there", but truth is not (Rorty 1989: 5). The world is out there in the sense that human beings have a world to which they strive to adapt through the use of various tools and patterns of action. Truth, however, does not relate to "the world", but rather to sentences within a given language. Language is conceived of not as a medium of accurate representation of the world, but rather as a tool with which we equip ourselves in order to *cope* with the world.

From Rorty's viewpoint, the world may well cause us to hold beliefs once we have attained a given language, but it cannot help us decide which language to speak. This is the baseline of Rorty's *nominalism*: Words refer not to physical objects in the world, but to other words and rules in a given language. His *historicism* is the conception of language as an historical contingency, as the result of long-lasting and continuous change in a culture's habits of speaking (Rorty 1989:4-6). With this perspective, the idea of providing a new ethic on universal ground can be abandoned. Having left behind environmental

foundationalism, this chapter turns to the question of how we can approach environmental ethics without it.

Whether a given sentence is true depends on the social rules of justification in the given vocabulary within which it is expressed. This perspective has consequences for how we conceive *theory*. As we have seen, philosophers are not distinguished by a privileged access to the world, but by the use of a certain vocabulary, one that differs from those used by the larger public. A mark of this vocabulary is that it generalizes “thin” and general concepts on the basis of “thick” and concrete opinions and values in society. Given the social character of justification, such “thin” generalizations will be accepted by a broader audience only if they expressed opinions and values which that audience already complies with. In this chapter, therefore, I argue that *theories* of environmental ethics are not efficient tools for attaining ethical change.

To Rorty, change is not a matter of argument or discovery, but of *redescription*. It is about creating new ways of talking about ourselves and the world. Change is related to metaphorical, “abnormal” language use rather than argumentative exchanges within the rules of a given vocabulary. Accordingly, moral progress is not a matter of increasing our moral knowledge, but rather of extending the boundaries of loyalty by experiencing new kinds of suffering. The thin generalizations of ethical theory are not suited to offer such experiences. Rather, if literature has significance for moral progress, it is through the thick and detailed descriptions of *narrative* and *poetic* literature. This chapter, therefore, ends with a reading of the narrative writings of Aldo Leopold and the poetic writings of Wislawa Szymborska. Reading these as redescriptive efforts to increase our sensitivity and loyalties towards nonhuman nature, I argue in this chapter that our chance of attaining an environmental ethic depends on creative and narrative nature-writing rather than well-justified theories.



### 3.2 Metaphor, theory and social change

In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Rorty discusses the consequences for social criticism of accepting historicism and nominalism. The acknowledgement of the contingency of our language, leads him to turn away from concepts such as intrinsic nature or intrinsic value, not because they are invalid, but because they are expressions that “it would pay us not to use” and which have “caused us more trouble than it has been worth” (Rorty 1989:8). Drawing on Davidson’s and Wittgenstein’s concept of languages and vocabularies as tools, Rorty places *the metaphor* in the center of changes in social and intellectual history. Developments in science, politics and philosophy are not results of discovering the words which accurately represent reality, but rather of inventing *new vocabularies* which happen to do certain things better than the old tools we have available (Rorty 1989:19). A change in the history of language involves metaphorical language use, in the sense that words (noises and marks, in Davidson’s words) are used in an unfamiliar way, breaking with the literalness of normal discourse. Using a metaphor, in this sense, implies uttering something that has no place in the language game within which the conversation takes place (Rorty 1989:18). Rorty writes:

Nietzschean history of culture, and Davidsonian philosophy of language, see language as we now see evolution, as new forms of life constantly killing off old forms – not to accomplish a higher purpose, but *blindly* (Rorty 1989:19, *my italics*)

Given that a sentence without a place in a language game cannot be determined by the rules of that language game, the chance of it becoming a part of *normal discourse* depends on the general willingness in society to “savour it rather than spit it out” (Rorty 1989:18), and the degree to which it becomes a linguistic *habit*. There is no *necessity* connected to the acceptance of a given metaphor. The languages we use, and those we replace them with, are contingent.

The metaphorical character of changes within politics, science and philosophy points to the fact that such changes do not come about as a result of new

hypotheses that are testable and affirmable by the audience of an existing vocabulary. Rather, they are the result of holistic alternatives to the ways of thinking which we currently practice (Rorty 1989:9). Rorty's own "revolutionary" contribution to philosophy – the suggestion that we abandon the Platonist way of thinking about knowledge – is an example of a new vocabulary being proposed as a pragmatic suggestion about how we might do things differently, rather than an argumentative attack on the prevailing theories. There is nothing "before" language to which language must be adequate, and no criterion outside language according to which some ways of talking are better than others.

If there is no point of reference outside a vocabulary except another vocabulary, there is no direction in scientific or political development towards a universal truth about intrinsic nature, and no a telos towards which history has always progressed. From this viewpoint, cultural, intellectual and political change is a contingent conversion from one vocabulary to another, from one tool to another, bringing about new and different possibilities for cultural and intellectual practices. Accordingly, the role of science and philosophy is not to address questions such as "are we currently describing the world as it really is" or "are our practices really morally right", but rather pragmatic questions like "is our way of describing this subject matter as good as possible" and "are our practices as good as they can be, or may there be another way of doing things". In other words, scientific, ethical and political inquiry is not directed towards reaching unconditional truth, but towards adjusting to our environments (Rorty 1999:72).

In the sphere of ethics, this perspective lets us review the concept of morality as it is understood in the traditions of philosophical ethics and environmental foundationalism. The philosophical distinction of the conditional from the unconditional, and of the categorical from the hypothetical, clears the ground for an absolute distinction between morality and prudence, a distinction materialized in Kant's moral philosophy (Kant 1997). For Rorty, however, the distinction between morality and prudence is parallel to the difference between normal and

abnormal discourse. While prudence expresses an ability to behave usefully and adaptively within familiar circumstances, the notion of morality appears whenever an unfamiliar situation arises which needs resolution. This difference is not a difference in kind, but rather in degree, since “there is no distinction in kind between what is useful and what is right” (Rorty 1999:73). Rorty paraphrases Dewey’s thoughts on this distinction as follows:

[... ] philosophers who have sharply distinguished reason from experience, or morality from prudence, have tried to turn an important difference in degree into a difference of metaphysical kind. They have thereby constructed problems for themselves which are as insoluble as they are artificial (Rorty 1999:75)

For Rorty, the ideas of a domain of pure morality to be investigated by the ethical theorist, and of a perspective-free vocabulary from which all other vocabularies may be evaluated, are of little practical use. From a nominalist perspective, the degree to which an ethical theory is objectively right is parallel to the degree to which it is *trivial*, that is, the degree to which we already hold the beliefs professed by it. Since there is no foundation or starting point for such ethical theory other than the actual intuitions in society, the former is informed by the latter, and not the other way around.

This perspective amounts to a redescription of ethical theory. Rorty proposes that we replace the image of moral philosophy as providing independent support for convictions and intuitions with an image of philosophy as *summarizing* our shared convictions and intuitions (Rorty 1998a:171). Human rights, on this view, will not be conceived as a set of moral laws rationally deduced from a philosophically accessible domain of moral knowledge, but rather as a general summarization of the moral intuitions which are more or less common to the societies that embrace them. Rorty mentions John Rawls as an example of a philosopher who takes on such a summarizing role, noting that his principles of justice are presented as a theoretical generalization of the ethical intuitions which pervade in liberal democracies (Rorty 1998a:171). Although Rorty does not

embrace all aspects of Rawls' theory<sup>4</sup>, it serves as an example of a theory that takes cultural and social intuitions and norms as a starting point. In his paper "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical", Rawls writes:

[...] as a practical political matter no general moral conception can provide a publicly recognized basis for a conception of justice in a modern democratic state. The social and historical conditions of such a state have their origins in the Wars of Religions following the Reformation and the subsequent development of the principle of toleration, and in the growth of constitutional government and the institutions of large industrial market economies. These conditions profoundly affect the requirements of a workable conception of political justice. (Rawls 1985:225)

In Rortyan terms, what Rawls is describing in this paragraph is the social character of justification, and the contingency of the final vocabulary in which moral theories may attain such justification. Rawls' theory, then, is an attempt to offer a useful summarization of the common convictions of modern democracies. Although these convictions are contingent, they make up the frame for social justification of ethical theory:

We can regard these convictions as provisional fixed points which any conception of justice must account for if it is to be reasonable for us. We look, then, to our public political culture itself, including its main institutions and the historical traditions of their interpretation, as the shared fund of implicitly recognized basic ideas and principles (Rawls 1985: 228).

In other words, ethical and political theory is not a matter of converting universal truths to cultural practice, but rather of creating summary redescriptions of the common convictions of our *historically* constituted cultures. Human rights and the basic freedoms of a liberal democracy are expressions of *the culture* in which they emerge. We do not owe the emergence of human rights to the existence of a universal human nature with certain intrinsic inviolable rights and freedoms. We owe it to the human rights culture which happened to grow out of the last century (Rorty 1998a:170). As generalizations of the common points of our moral intuitions, the human rights, as well as the difference principle, are dependent on

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<sup>4</sup> Rorty rejects the Rawlsian original situation because it presupposes a choosing self even when all talents, values and beliefs are subtracted. See Rorty 1983:585

these intuitions, not the other way around. Such principles do not “ground” our moral intuitions by pointing to the universality of their basic presumptions, but are themselves “thin” concept abstractions of our current “thick” conceptions of rights and freedoms.

The idea that providing concepts of justice is a matter of discovering some universal core across humanity is the common assumption of foundationalist philosophy. On this view, morality starts “thin” with some pre-lingual concept of justice, derived from the faculty of reason or some other depth. Although this pure moral insight is clouded and “thickened” by cultural contingencies, we may still discover the pure intuition through rational reconstruction. This is the basic idea behind Kantian moral philosophy, clearing the ground for a distinction between prudence and morality. However, if we accept Rorty’s application of Davidson’s and Wittgenstein’s views on language, in which there are no beliefs prior to the acquisition of a vocabulary, the idea of pre-lingual moral intuitions becomes irrelevant. As Michael Walzer puts it,

Morality is thick from the beginning, culturally integrated, fully resonant, and it reveals itself thinly only on special occasions, when moral language is turned to specific purposes. (Walzer 1994:4)

If morality is thick from the beginning, there is nothing foundational about thin morality. Moral philosophy’s distinction between morality and prudence or between justice and loyalty, and its ability to ground and edify society, depends on its descriptions to be *different in kind* from, and ontologically prior to, the thick conceptions of society. If the thin and the thick are only distinguished by degree, and if the latter is primary to the former, then the difference prudence and morality, justice and loyalty becomes a matter of degree, and theory becomes secondary (Rorty 1997). Accordingly, moral philosophy’s role as supporter and edifier of our moral intuitions becomes vapid. If ethical theory is a kind of “thinning out” of these intuitions, it has no role in *shaping* them. This is why Stanley Fish concludes that theory cannot guide our practices:

Theory cannot guide practice because its rules and procedures are no more than generalizations from practice's history (and from only a small piece of that history), and theory cannot reform practice because, rather than neutralizing interest, it begins and ends in interest and raises the imperatives of interest – of some local, particular, partisan project – to the status of universals. (Fish 1989:321)

Thus, just as theory cannot provide independent support for the human rights, neither has it taken part in their creation. Our human rights culture is not a consequence of an increase in “moral knowledge”, but rather of an increase in the degree to which the members of that culture have been exposed to the sufferings and poverty of other human beings. The distinctive characteristic of this culture is not that it gradually abandons group loyalty in favor of universal justice, but rather that its members are loyal to increasingly larger groups of human beings, as they see more and more differences between themselves and others as morally irrelevant (Rorty 1997).

The advantage of this view on morality is that it becomes completely disconnected from metaphysics, and is no longer subject to questions like “do we *really* have these rights?” or “do we *really* have a responsibility to help people in need?” Such questions presuppose that our moral development is somehow determined by an increase in ahistorical moral knowledge, a kind of knowledge that lets us distinguish between moral truths that are unconditional, and those who are merely conventional, social constructions. To Rorty, however, there is nothing of which we speak that is not a so-called social construction. Insofar as we speak of it, it is always part of the social construction of a language (Rorty 1999:84-85).

To Rorty, theorists that seek to answer the above questions attempt to fuse *the public*, the common discourse based on shared assumptions and premises; and *the private*, the metaphysical and theological striving for perfection. Foundationalism aims at merging the private and the public by locating a common human nature to which they must both correspond. The philosopher who grounds political and moral assertions in metaphysical or otherwise ahistorical principles is

synthesizing the vocabularies of self-creation and justice, two distinct tools with distinct purposes, which in Rorty's mind need to be kept apart (Rorty 1989: xiii-xiv). Rawls has a similar view:

Given the profound differences in belief and conceptions of the good at least since the Reformation, we must recognize that, just as questions of religious and moral doctrine, public agreement on the basic questions of philosophy cannot be obtained without the state's infringement of basic liberties. Philosophy as the search for truth about an independent metaphysical and moral order cannot, I believe, provide a workable and shared basis for a political conception of justice in a democratic society. (Rawls 1985:230)

To paraphrase Rawls and Rorty, the philosophical search for perspective free metaphysical or metaethical insight is a private project of self-creation parallel to the search for religious truth. Justification within the public debate about values, responsibilities and moral convictions, is another matter:

Rather, justification is addressed to others who disagree with us, and therefore it must always proceed from some consensus, that is, from premises that we and others publicly recognize as true [...] (Rawls 1985:229)

While the philosophical search for universal truth is a private project of self-creation, justification within the public debate is a matter of reaching agreement upon commonly accepted premises. The failure to maintain this distinction is the common mistake of both the environmental foundationalists and environmental pragmatists discussed in this thesis. Their common flaw, from a Rortyan point of view, is to identify the discussion of whether and how we should change our practices, with the discussion of what value *really is*, and what *really has* value. The assumption by such philosophers that to answer the latter will solve the former leads them in directions that have turned out to be unfruitful.

In modern liberal culture, writings and propositions that are part of the *public* domain take their starting point in the *shared* vocabulary and convictions of our community. Their potential for criticism is the ability to reveal failures of our institutions to live up to these convictions through argumentative exchange. The vocabulary of self-creation, on the other hand, "is necessarily private, unshared,

unsuited to argument” (Rorty 1989: xiv), because it involves the aim of re-creating oneself by being critical of the shared convictions of society. A historicist’s criticism of one’s own society, however, affirms the contingency not only of the convictions of society, but also of her own criticism. Someone who is nominalist and historicist to this degree is what Rorty calls an “ironist”. A *liberal* ironist, the utopian character of Rorty’s modern liberal democracy, is an ironist for whom the hope for less cruelty and more solidarity is among the most central of her ungroundable convictions.

For Rorty, there is no contradiction in realizing one’s own contingency and being willing to die for a cause one believes in. We *can* hold our human rights culture to be superior to other cultures, *without* claiming that it is closer than its alternatives to some universal human nature (Rorty 1998a:170). Maintaining one’s beliefs while abandoning their universality amounts to what Rorty calls “ethnocentrism” – we privilege our own group and our own final vocabularies, even though we accept that there is no justification for such privilege outside the final vocabulary itself (Rorty 1991:29). The realization that our convictions are part of a culturally and socially constituted vocabulary has no necessary consequences for whether we believe in them or not. The ironist, however, is characterized by a *doubt* as to whether she has been taught the best language, or whether she could have been a better human being with a different final vocabulary. But since there can be no critique of a final vocabulary except from another final vocabulary, or of a culture except from another culture, there is no “criterion of wrongness” by which this doubt might be settled (Rorty 1989:75). Thus, the ironist’s strive for a different vocabulary is directed towards new metaphors which may replace the old ones, rather than a vocabulary that is closer to something outside the reach of vocabularies.

The reason why such ironist critique is not a public concern is that it implies the attempt to abandon the final vocabulary in which it would be expressed. On Rorty’s view, the effort to change one’s final vocabulary is not a theoretical process. To the ironist, philosophical theories express the thinnest possible



generalizations of the final vocabulary in which they emerge. As such, they are platitudes rather than moral intuitions, platitudes which will change whenever the actual final vocabulary has changed. Thus, while the metaphysician conceives the history of philosophy as a chain of new discoveries that have guided society towards what it is today, the ironist conceives it as a series of summaries of European cultural practices in different periods in of history. Redescription, rather than inference from accepted premises, is the method of change, because it aims towards making new vocabularies rather than working *within* one (Rorty 1989:76-79).

The relation between vocabularies and theories described in the above paragraphs lets us abandon theory as an instrument for social change. If theories are generalizations, and if there is nothing on the outside of our vocabularies that they may generalize, theory has no other option than summarizing our shared convictions and finding useful platitudes which we may all consent to. Social change is a matter of making new descriptions about ourselves and our relationships to others. Environmental ethics, however, strives for social change by offering *theories* about ourselves and our relationships to others. With the provision of a new ethics through metaphysical insights, they seek to ground solidarity in objectivity. This idea is turned on its head in Rorty's writings. The conception of objectivity as the broadest possible agreement in society makes objectivity dependent on solidarity, not the other way around (Rorty 1991). To the degree that environmental foundationalists provide theoretical summaries of *shared* convictions, these convictions are shared in the highly limited final vocabulary of environmental philosophers themselves. In relation to the public their theories are, at best, summaries of a possible future of shared convictions. As theories, however, they have little effect in obtaining that possible future.

An ethic, conceived as the convictions we share about what we should and should not do as a member of our society, cannot simply be provided. A philosophical theory about how we might act if we were different from today is simply a theory about how some imaginable people would act in our situation. The problem, of

course, is that although it is future possibility, we are not *currently* this other imaginable people. The emergence of environmental values and convictions is not a matter of decision, but of gradual cultural change through continuous redescription. Arguably, philosophical theory is not an efficient tool for such a task. The remaining parts of this chapter address the question of what tools we might put in its place.

### 3.3 Moral progress and larger loyalty

Although the Rortyan distinction between morality and prudence is one of degree, the distinction is still relevant for the conception of moral progress. Given that our moral self-conceptions are comprised, among other things, by the relationships in our families, acting out of family loyalty is not a matter of moral choice, but of simply acting *naturally*. The word “moral”, on the other hand, points to a demand or choice which does not come naturally, but which may require an *extension* of the boundaries of loyalty. Moral progress is about extending the limits of our moral selves, in the sense of including more and more people, and groups of people, into our domain of loyalty. From this viewpoint, moral progress is a process of increasing sensitivity and responsiveness towards wider and wider sympathy, rather than reaching higher and higher towards certain moral knowledge (Rorty 1999:79-82).

At first glance, this conception of moral progress might seem somewhat similar to Callicott’s reading of Leopold’s “extension of ethics”. As we saw in chapter one, Leopold envisions a continuous extension of our ethical boundaries, and conceives the inclusion of the land as a natural next step. Callicott takes this image into the vocabulary of philosophy, claiming its validity through a theory of ethical convictions as adaptation to the ecological worldview. Although Rorty’s writings are indeed parallel, with regards to both the idea of extension and that of ethical adaptation, he does not share Callicott’s conception of how moral progress can be attained. The ethical extensions by which we have attained our

culture of human rights have not come about without by themselves. The idea of ethical extension as an adaptive process does not amount to a foundation by which our values and opinions achieve perspective free justification. Most importantly, the assertion of these concepts in a philosophical theory does not lead us towards environmental moral progress. As we will see at the end of this chapter, Rorty's perspective lets us turn away from the theoretical assertions of Callicott's philosophy, and return to the narrative writings of his protagonist Aldo Leopold.

If we see moral progress as extending our sympathies and widening our circle of loyalty, we no longer need to justify or argue for moral progress by reference to universal standards. If the aim is to extend our loyalties rather than our knowledge about morality, it is sufficient to redescribe more and more differences between people as *morally irrelevant*. In many cases, certain cultural groups have identified themselves in terms of *contradictions* to other groups. It seems unrealistic to convince them to accept their enemies by virtue of the philosophical reference to a common "human nature". Rather than finding the one universal commonality amongst all human beings, we can focus our attention of finding a variety of numerous, different commonalities between various groups of people, commonalities which may take the place of moral relevance from the differences which currently prevail (Rorty 1999:87).

Similarly, most people do not experience deep commonality with plants and bees, and so have problems accepting moral commandments which presuppose such commonalities. The various "centrisms" of environmental philosophy resemble Kantian moral philosophy in their effort to *find* the locus of true value and thereby *determine* what we may or may not do by reference to this locus. Such "discoveries", however, has no consequence for our inclinations to act in any particular way. Insofar as such theories are discoveries, they are discoveries of thin generalizations of our already shared moral convictions. This is why Rorty prefers Hume's and Annette Baier's perspective on morality and moral progress to the Kantian alternative. On this view, moral progress is a progress of

sentiments, a sentimental education aiming towards “an increasing ability to see the similarities between ourselves and people very unlike us as outweighing the differences” (Rorty 1998a:181). If we substitute sympathy for rationality as the source of morality and moral progress, we can conceive our human rights culture as the result of a diversity of differences, such as skin color, sex, nationality and religion, becoming morally irrelevant as a result of our experience of commonalities in their place. From this perspective, we can conceive the moral progress of the last two centuries,

[...] not as a period of deepening understanding of the nature of rationality or of morality, but rather as one in which there occurred an astonishingly rapid progress of sentiments, in which it has become much easier for us to be moved to action by sad and sentimental stories. (Rorty 1998a:185)

Moral progress is not achieved through theories and descriptions of moral truth, values or the intrinsic nature of human beings. It cannot be implemented or proscribed by philosophers or other intellectuals. Rather, moral progress continues as long as we experience the sorrows of new groups of beings. Therefore, it has less to do with knowledge than it has to do with imagination, less to do with discovering facts than coming up with *redescriptions* which put people, things and relations in a new light (Rorty 1999:87-88). This is Rorty’s description of what feminists do when they try to overcome the “phallogocentrism” of institutions, of what Martin Luther King did when he fought racial segregation in the United States, and of what animal rights activists are currently doing when they advocate for animal rights. Such efforts are not a matter of renewing our use of words through philosophical or etymological analysis, but rather of *cultural politics*. They are attempts to modify the way we use certain words, descriptions or whole languages and to change our cultural practices by actualizing “hitherto-undreamt-of possibilities” (Rorty 1998a:208; 2007:3). Surely, there are numerous historical examples, ranging from civil war rhetoric to Nazi propaganda, of redescriptions that lead us away from the liberal aim of a wider sympathy. Rorty is not saying that all redescriptions are means for moral progress. In a liberal democracy, the redescriptions which contribute to

moral progress are those who make us prone to include more people in our ethical considerations, and less prone to cruelty. In Rorty's liberal *utopia*, the citizens are ironist enough to face the contingency of their own beliefs, but still committed to increasing solidarity and extension of loyalties. In such a society, redescription towards moral extension make up the cultural politics, and have replaced religion and representationalist philosophy as forces of redemption and solidarity. Ironists such as Rorty hope that through a continuous redescription of our society and ourselves in the light of different literary and political vocabularies and figures, we may become better as a society and as human beings.

In the process of working towards an environmental ethic, the view of moral progress as a process of cultural politics – of redescription and exposure to the sorrows of others – is arguably preferable to the image of ethical change as philosophical discovery. If one accepts moral realism and a conception of moral progress as increased moral knowledge, the future of nonhuman nature is dependent, so to speak, of the yet-to-be-clarified question of whether there *is* an environmental ethic to be discovered. This question is what drives the debate within foundationalist environmental ethics, and explains why it is so important to locate some *intrinsic value* in nature that cannot be denied. Environmental philosophers fear that if nature is left only with instrumental value, it might be gradually replaced by other “instruments” and thus lose its value, potentially allowing for overconsumption and misuse of a philosophically defenseless nature.

The application of moral realism within environmental ethics faces two significant challenges. First, the assumption of moral realism, and the consequent search for certain moral knowledge, will not work well for environmental ethics unless the “discovery” of environmental value is not more or less *unanimous* within the discourse of environmental philosophy itself. This is part of the reason why environmental philosophy has turned into an intrinsic-instrumental debate and stagnated within the discipline. The assumption that there is one “right answer” to the question of value in nature makes it crucial for philosophers that

*all* philosophers agree on it. Second, even a complete consensus of intrinsic value within environmental philosophy would be subject to social justification. Even if we were to accept the assumption of moral realism, we would still have to face the challenge that *the public* does not tend to act upon it. Since a philosophical consensus on a given theory is not likely to *change* our ethical dispositions, the broader, social justification of that theory is not to be expected unless we become, by other means, a culture whose shared convictions may be thinned down and generalized to precisely these principles.

An advantage of the historicist conception of moral progress is that it lets us conceive the progress towards an environmental ethic as conceptually unproblematic, as there are no “philosophical problems” to be solved. From this viewpoint, there is no difference in *kind* between an anthropocentric ethic and an environmental ethic, and thus there is no ethical revolution which needs foundation from new philosophical discoveries. All that matters is that we keep extending our loyalties. Accordingly, we can say that although it is going slower than we hoped for, we have already begun this process.

Nevertheless, it seems unsatisfying to passively wait for liberal democracy to continue its moral progress. The question is how, if not through theoretical achievements, we can speed up this process and contribute to moral progress towards the inclusion of nonhuman nature. In the following, I will discuss Rorty’s perspectives on *literature* (in both broad and narrow terms) as force of sentimental education, and on *literary criticism* as intellectual contribution to moral progress.

### 3.4 From philosophical theory to literary criticism

As we have seen, Rorty conceives of social change as a matter of new metaphors becoming normalized, and of new redescription changing the ways we conceive of the world and ourselves. Moral progress in a liberal society depends on such metaphors and redescription to challenge the limits of our ethical considerations

– the boundaries of our solidarity. From Rorty’s viewpoint, increasing such solidarity is not a matter of argumentative persuasion, or of obliterating prejudices about people different from us. Solidarity is not about general or universal commonalities. Rather, it is created by “increasing our sensitivity to the *particular details* of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people” (Rorty 1989: xvi, *my italics*). Increasing one’s solidarity is a process by which the unfamiliar becomes familiar, and in which that which we once ignored becomes a natural part of our concern, as it takes part in our moral and social identities. The level of detail and particularity required to give such redescriptions their moral force lets us abandon any theoretical efforts at moral progress. In contrast to ethical theories, which are general and abstract, redescriptions with moral force are expressed within genres that are concrete and particular enough to *tell stories* rather than explaining. Thus, the genres of moral change are *narrative* rather than theoretical. Rorty writes:

This is a task not for theory but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist’s report, the comic book, the docudrama, and especially, the novel. [...] The novel, the movie and the TV program have, gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress. (Rorty 1989: xvi)

The moral force of narrative genres lies in their ability to show us the sufferings of people we have been oblivious to, or the cruelties which are imaginable within our own culture. To Rorty, the writers of such contributions, in the form of fictional movies, newspaper articles or novels, are “serving human liberty” (Rorty 1989:145).

Since they deal with cruelty and solidarity, these writers are examples of what Rorty calls public writers. They are contrasted with private writers such as Proust, Kierkegaard and Heidegger, who write towards private perfection rather than solidarity. It is the former group of writers that are interesting in this chapter. Although a writer like Nabokov, a pronounced aesthete, stylist and apolitical writer, claimed little interest in the genre of political literature, Rorty sees in Nabokov’s most famous novel a warning against cruelty: “The moral [of *Lolita*]

is not to keep one's hands off little girls but to notice what one is doing, and in particular to notice what people are saying. For it might turn out [...] that people are trying to tell you that they are suffering" (Rorty 1989:164). What matters to Rorty in this context is not the stylistic or aesthetic quality of the literature in itself, but the fact that such novels, like the ones of Orwell, turned out to make a difference in how we conceive others, our social institutions and ourselves. They make a difference for our future. These achievements are the not results of philosophical or political arguments rapped in the framework of a fictional work of art, or of revealing the *truth* as opposed to our common misconceptions. Rather, these works become influential as redescriptions which let us see and adapt to a *new* perspective on our culture (Rorty 1989:170-174). They have force not because they correspond better to reality than competing descriptions, but because people read and are affected by their redescriptions, thereby increasing the chances of turning their metaphors into new vocabularies.

Redescription is also the proper term for what Rorty himself is doing when he provides us with readings of these novelists. When he interprets Nabokov, Orwell and Dickens as writing to increase our "ability to see more and more traditional differences [...] as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation" (Rorty 1989:192), he joins the competition with alternative, incompatible descriptions of the same works. While other readers will interpret these writers as expressing philosophical assertions about the nature of reality, Rorty reads them as embracing the contingency of language without giving up on solidarity. An example of this kind of redescriptive disagreement is James Conant's critique of Rorty's reading of Orwell. Conant (2005) maintains that Rorty's reading in no way expresses the political and philosophical opinions of Orwell. To Rorty, however, the point is not to be true to what Orwell "really means" or what his writings are "really about". Orwell's writings can be described in a number of ways, and Rorty's description is as interpretive and foundation-less as that of Conant himself. What matters to Rorty is *the use* to which we put Orwell's writings, not the intentions with which they were written.



Conant wants Orwell to warn us against the dangers of abandoning objectivity. Rorty wants Orwell to warn us of the cruelties that we are capable of.

Such efforts to redescribe our culture through comparisons of different figures, writers and vocabularies amounts to what Rorty calls *literary criticism*. This term is not meant to denote written literature as the sole subject matter of criticism, but expresses the adaptation of the tendency of literary critics (in a more literal sense) to compare and contextualize their readings, rather than the tendency of philosophers to de-contextualize and analyze. Literary criticism seeks to revise our final vocabularies, and thereby our moral identities, by seeing old things in new contexts, and new things in old contexts. To Rorty, literary criticism does for the ironist what philosophy does for the absolutist. While the latter criticizes and compares with reference to something outside the domain of criticism, the former has internalized the contingency of vocabularies and accepts the absence of a pre-linguistic measure for all languages.

As philosophy may be useful in a metaphysical culture which is in need of new theories, literary criticism is useful in an ironist culture in which one has doubts about one's current vocabulary. Its usefulness is not a matter of epistemic authority or freedom from perspective, but rather a matter of having *read more books* than others – of having an “exceptionally large range of acquaintance” (Rorty 1989:80). To Rorty, such a critic can contribute to our moral progress by suggesting revisions of our canons of moral heroes and antagonists, and thus “facilitate moral reflection” (1989:82). Contrary to the philosophical role in moral progress as conceived by metaphysicians, ironist literary critics see no point in guiding the public towards specific moral principles, or in providing theories about morality. When they are expected to do that, the expectations are part of a metaphysical culture rather than ironist culture (Rorty 1989:82).

Moral progress in an ironist culture depends not on the generalizations of philosophers, but rather on thick, concrete and detailed descriptions of cruelty and suffering. As theorizing philosophers, we are limited to conventional

summaries of cultural convictions or attempts at private perfection. Literary critics who take part in the public discourse by comparing and discussing literature, however, can play a constructive role in the moral progress of liberal democracies.

In the case of environmental ethics, literary criticism has the significant advantage that it is arguably more in tune with public expectations than their philosophical counterpart. The isolation of environmental philosophy from the public discourse indicates that the willingness of the public to be dictated by philosophical doctrines is decreasing. As discussed in previous chapters, this gap might have several causes. One of these may be that environmental philosophers tend to emphasize as vital what Rorty conceives of as an unfortunate mixing of tools, namely to ground ethics in something else than our common convictions, either by reference to philosophical principles, or to the proposal of a new “ecological self” constructed to provoke the needed ethical revolution. To Rorty, this mix of private and public discourses is fruitless. We might hope that a more ecological conception of the self might emerge in the light of continuous redescription of our relationships to nonhuman nature. Offering a *theory* about it, however, bears little practical significance.

### 3.5 Literature and environmental ethics

From a Rortyan perspective on ethical change, we can say that to the degree that the environmental crisis is a matter of *moral* progress, narrative and poetic redescriptions have more potential as tools for its solution than do ethical theories. Nonanthropocentric foundationalist philosophers, such as Paul Taylor and J. Baird Callicott, conceive of the environmental problem as a moral problem, but arrive at a different conclusion due to their unwavering belief in the abilities of their own discipline. They conceive of environmental problems as matters to be solved through the direction of our moral progress towards species-neutral and

life-centered ethical convictions, and assume the domain for such direction to be objective argument through philosophical reasoning.

The conjunction of these two premises – that the environmental problem is a moral problem and that philosophy can “solve” moral problems – makes up the framework of environmental foundationalism as it has been practiced for several decades. In this chapter I have challenged the latter premise by arguing along with Rorty that the only problems for philosophers to solve are philosophical ones. As a generalized, abstract and detached form of writing, philosophy is not an efficient tool for cultural change, but rather for general descriptions of our ethical status quo. Theory does not “ground” our culture, it *summarizes* it. Philosophy does not change our cultures practices, but *describes* them in a particular manner.

However, the premise that the environmental problem is a matter of moral progress should not as quickly be discarded. If we conceive “an ethic” as the prevailing cultural convictions about moral considerability, then to call for a *new* ethic is simply to say that if we were to share ethical convictions in which nonhuman nature enjoyed sympathy and consideration, we would have more motivation for minimizing nature-hazardous practices. As conceived by Rorty, moral progress is a sentimental process of inclusion which comes about when we experience the suffering of new groups of beings, and accordingly disregard the differences between us and them as morally irrelevant. Progress is *moral* when it consists of an extension of the prevailing ethical boundaries.

On this view, Bryan Norton’s (2005) suggestion that we can come to terms with the environmental problems without the moral inclusion of non-human nature, is a suggestion that we can solve it *without moral progress*. Norton dismisses the call for a *new* ethic due to the difficulties of providing its foundation (on his view, anthropocentric ethics is already firmly grounded). For an anti-foundationalist, however, there is no such foundation to be found for *any* ethics, old or new. Moral progress is not a matter of foundations, but of contingent

changes in our moral considerations, susceptible to influence from a number of angles. The question worth considering here is whether there are ways in which *literature* may help us attain an environmental ethic. This means accepting, for the time being, the approach to the environmental problems as a moral problem.

If we take Routley's call for a new ethic as encouraging us to include new groups of entities and creatures in our moral circle of loyalty, there is no conflict with the Rortyan conception of moral progress. The latter, however, is not compatible with the call for *philosophy* to provide us with a new set of values and beliefs that are proven superior. As we have seen, the Humean conception of morality as sentimental rather than rational leads Rorty to emphasize creative and narrative writings as significant to moral progress. The emergence of our human rights culture, social welfare, gender equality and increasing sympathies towards animals, have little to do with theories about their intrinsic value, and more to do with new stories about groups which we previously did not know so well. Analogously, the possible emergence of an environmental ethic in our culture depends less on philosophical claims of intrinsic value in nature than on narrative and poetic redescriptions of nature that provoke feelings and sympathy.

However, the moral inclusion of non-sentient nature differs from previous moral extensions in certain ways that may indicate a challenge. Human beings and animals differ from non-sentient beings in the sense that they have concrete suffering and pain that may easily be "experienced" by a complete stranger. A tree or a green leaf may be living creatures, but as we currently conceive of them, they have no pain or agony, and are indifferent to whether they live or die. In addition, a human stranger or a caged fox differ from entities such as "the environment" or "the ecosystem" in the sense that the former are concrete beings for which our actions can have concrete consequences, while the latter are abstract and complex concepts. The degree to which beings are singular, sentient and expressive of pain, together with their degree of similarity with us, appears to have significance for the facility of including them in our moral community.

As our culture conceives them, abstract concepts such as “the environment” express complex webs of relations between multitudes of beings, lacking both singularity and sentience. Apparently, we are far from identifying with such entities, and currently fail to recognize any *environmental suffering* which is not sustained by living and sentient victims of environmental degradation. In short, the environment is intellectually complicated and morally distant. The task of bringing us closer to an experience of suffering among non-human nature is a challenging, complicated and time-consuming process of redescription. Environmental philosophy has attempted to circumvent such conversational moral progress by dictating the values that would turn this picture around. However, since this project has had little success, I suggest that we relieve the foundationalists of their burden, and instead place it on the shoulders of poets – creative and narrative writers who use redescription and metaphor in order to open up to new ways of conceiving and talking about the world. In contrast to the philosophical approach to the subject matter, these poets have no conceptual shortcuts at their disposal.

The complexity of our natural environment and its relative distance from our traditional ethical convictions pose a significant challenge to nature-writers who aim at its moral inclusion. To experience environmental suffering requires us to reduce the conceptual and ethical distance between ourselves and nonhuman nature. Arguably, we need descriptions of nature as less different and distant from us, and at the same time less *indifferent* to our maltreatment of it. In the following section, I will discuss some literary works which aim to redescribe sentient nature so as to enable us to identify with it and experience a kind of environmental suffering.

### **3.5.1 Poetry and the sentient nature – Wislawa Szymborska**

The Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1996, for "for poetry that with ironic precision allows the historical and biological context to come to light in fragments of human reality" (Nobel Prize

2014). Although her poetic oeuvre is multifaceted<sup>5</sup>, she has been particularly noted for her ability to describe and relate to non-human nature in ways that break with both common sense and convention. In several poems, Szymborska imagines entering into conversation and discussion with non-sentient creatures such as plants and stones, reflecting on the relationship between instances of “silent nature” and herself as a human being. In “The Silence of Plants”, she writes, on the impossible and yet necessary conversation with what we conceive as non-sentient nature:

We wouldn't lack for topics: we've got a lot in common / The same star keeps us in its reach / We cast shadows based on the same laws / We try to understand things, each in our own way / and what we don't know brings us closer too. [...] Talking with you is essential and impossible / Urgent in this hurried life / and postponed forever (Szymborska 1998: 269).

The notion of an “essential” and “urgent”, and at the same time “impossible” conversation with nature inevitably brings associations to the environmental problems that threaten the existence of plants and their habitat. Szymborska's focus in this poem is the *relationship* between us human beings and the non-human nature which the speaker addresses. By accentuating the similarities between plants and herself, she attempts to engage in the very conversation which is deemed “impossible”, thereby blurring the line between the sentient and the non-sentient. The emphasis on such similarities and the shared world of conditions and premises may be read as an attempt to redescribe plant life as closer to human life than we currently conceive of it. In lines like “We try to understand things, each in our own way”, Szymborska aligns our conscious activity (“trying to understand”) with that of the plant, challenging the mark of sentience that divide living creatures into the categories of the conscious and unconscious. This line of thinking is not presented as a metaphysical assertion about the nature of plants. It is the result of maintaining a poetic *uncertainty*, and

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<sup>5</sup> See Brodal 1999

an embracement of the phrase “I don’t know”. In her Nobel Lecture, Szymborska writes:

The world – whatever we might think when we’re terrified by its vastness and our own impotence or when we’re embittered by its indifference to individual suffering, of people, animals, and perhaps even plants (for why are we so sure that plants feel no pain?), [...] we just don’t know; whatever we might think of this measureless theater to which we’ve got reserved tickets, but tickets whose life span is laughably short, bounded as it is by two arbitrary dates; whatever else we might think of this world – it is astonishing. (Szymborska 1998: xvi)

As I read it, this paragraph introduces some interesting themes that can be recognized in Szymborska’s poetry. One such theme is the insistence to *refrain from knowing*, expressed in her lecture as a virtue of great scientists and poets. Her description of this virtue is reminiscent of Rorty’s description of facing up to the contingency of culture by treating one’s convictions with irony instead of certainty. For both writers, this attitude is valuable, not as a general trait of our culture, but as a disposition amongst scientists and writers whose job it is to continuously come up with alternative ways of seeing the world. While the majority of a society’s inhabitants will normally embrace the truths and knowledge of the final vocabulary into which they have been socialized, ironists have their domain in the boundaries between this vocabulary and new vocabularies which they attempt to create (Rorty 1999: 87). Szymborska describes this attitude as “a continuous ‘I don’t know’”, and construes poetry as literature which may help us progress by looking away from our established truths and worldviews (Szymborska 1998: xiii-xiv).

The notion of a continuous dissociation from knowledge tells us that Szymborska holds no belief in the *epistemological* abilities of poets. Even when new knowledge emerges in opposition old knowledge, the new insights are as worthy of poetic dissociation as the old ones. The point is not that knowledge should be questioned in order to come closer to the *right* knowledge. Rather, it seems that Szymborska embraces a view of knowledge and truth quite similar to that of Rorty – as something which could always have been different, and therefore as

*always* worthy of questioning. Her belief in poetry, therefore, lies in its ability to treat established truths – our final vocabularies – as replaceable. Both Rorty and Szymborska acknowledge the need for final vocabularies, given the practical implausibility of a fully ironized culture. Since they also acknowledge the contingencies of such vocabularies, however, they find it crucial that writers and intellectuals treat them, as well as the vocabularies they create themselves, with irony.

As I read Szymborska, the potential force of poetry lies in the relation of this contingency to how we carry out and justify our practices. The ways in which we treat (or mistreat) non-human nature are determined by the desire to fulfill our human needs. Our shared ethical and scientific convictions are largely in concordance with these needs, allowing our conscience to go along with our anthropocentric practices. To Szymborska, however, there is no necessity tied to these convictions – they could have been different. Her rhetorical question “why are we so sure that plants feel no pain”, and her insistence on upholding the impossible conversation with them, portrays a worry about the practical consequences of treating plants the way we do. The ways in which we inhabit our environments are justified by the worldviews and values we treat as truths. For Szymborska, the environmental consequences of our practices indicate that our current truths and values may have better alternatives.

Since all vocabularies could be different, the ones that appear to justify and engender environmental degradation are worth a second look. This perspective is evident in the quoted passage from “The Silence of Plants”. In the midst of a conversation with a creature which in our established worldviews has no place as converser, Szymborska treats this creature as a conscious being. She does not *assert* that it has consciousness, but acts *as though* it did. As I read this poem, it shows us that the impossibility of “talking” with plants – of including them in our moral community and treating them with sympathy – is an impossibility only in so far as it is so construed in our final vocabulary, the same vocabulary in which conversing with a plant is not a viable option. Szymborska’s conversation with



the plant breaks with this final vocabulary, thus constituting what Rorty would call a *metaphor* – a concept without literal meaning, without a “fixed place in a language game” (Rorty 1999:18).

Although this reading might sound more Rortyan than Szymborskian, it exemplifies a way of relating to literature that emphasizes its potential for influencing our worldviews and ethical convictions. Like Rorty’s readings of Nabokov and Orwell, it illustrates literature’s ability to expose us to new kinds of suffering, and to bring to light the potential cruelties we are capable of. Szymborska’s writings do this by challenging our predominant descriptions of nature, not with a definite counter-description, but with descriptions which are open to the question of sentience and consciousness. It *might* be the case that plants have feelings, and we *might* be better off by treating them as though they did. If we did, then our current practices might be considered cruel, as they cause plants unnecessary suffering.

These descriptions, however, are not useful as attempts to *grasp* Szymborska’s poetry. They do not *give justice* to the poem, or disclose the *meaning* of the poem, because, as metaphor, the poem *has no meaning*. For it to have meaning depends on whether it becomes part of our vocabulary as literal language use (Rorty 1999:18). This process, however, is not aided by attempts to theorize the meaning of the poem by paraphrasing them in familiar terms – since there is no synonym or paraphrase with which it corresponds. As literary critics, all we can do is to promote the works of Szymborska as valuable literature, as descriptions that could make a difference if we adapted some of them and substituted them for some other ones.

Justyna Kostkowska, an ecofeminist and an advocate of Szymborska’s writings, agrees with much of the above description, and hails the poet for her redescriptions of nature. Reading the poem “Conversation with a Stone”, she emphasizes the construed equality between human and stone, and conceives the human being’s lack of a “sense of taking part” as an ignorance to the insights of

one's own body (Kostkowska 2006:150). Not unlike "The Silence of Plants", this poem explores the notion of sentience and consciousness among creatures we normally conceive as non-sentient and unconscious, and the deficiencies of our own knowledge of ourselves and the world. Kostkowska's reading, however, differs quite sharply from the Rortyan reading presented above. Her view of the poem and its author is interestingly expressed in the following paragraph:

I propose [an] integrating perspective, where Szymborska's ecological ethics (view of humanity and other species as equal), her epistemology (questioning and non-hierarchical thinking), and her formal practice (irony, humour, dialogic form, decentering of the human point of view) all function together as consequential, logically interdependent elements of an *underlying philosophical system*. This system has its *foundation* in ecofeminist multicentrism (Kostkowska 2006:151, *my italics*)

I agree with Kostkowska that Szymborska challenges the hierarchical convictions of human chauvinism. I also agree that she questions established truths, and that she does this by applying irony and dialogic form. I am not so certain, however, that these characteristics are proof that Szymborska subscribes to a certain "ethic" and a certain "epistemology". To conceive these poetic features not simply as poetic features, but rather as manifestations of an "underlying philosophical system", amounts to saying that the poems are expressions of a theory, rather than the other way around. Thus read, not only can the poem be paraphrased, but is itself a paraphrase of the theory upon which it is dependent. As paraphrase, the poem *represents* something – there is something which it "really means". Thus read, the novelty and creativity of Szymborskas poetry consists of nothing more than finding new ways of saying what is already established. This is the reason why the poem, in Kostkowska's view, is in need of a *foundation*. From this perspective, poetry is about aesthetics. Its role is to find beautiful ways of saying things which are discovered in the field of philosophical theory.

Kostkowska acknowledges and maintains the reluctance towards certainty, order and system expressed in Szymborska's poems, concluding that "we must resist the tendency to reduce al experience to a moral, and firmly oppose the artificial (i.e. unnatural) simplification of life" (Kostkowska 2006: 161). Kostkowska sees

this resistance as an expression of *multicentrism* – the concept that the world consists of a “multiplicity of centers and frames” (Kostkowska 2006: 156), a concept which she opposes to anthropocentrism as a more ecological starting point for ethics. However, there seems to be a slight conflict in Kostkowska’s text. On the one hand, she encourages resistance to order, system and simplicity. On the other, she construes that resistance as resting upon the foundations of the “philosophical system” of ecofeminism. Furthermore, the “simplification of life” which is seemingly ascribed to by non-ecofeminists is judged “artificial (i.e. unnatural)”. This indicates that Kostkowska and her fellow ecofeminist are not merely proposing an alternative view of ourselves and nature, but have indeed discovered that our current convictions are *wrong*. There is a *natural* way of describing and relating to nature, and its name is ecofeminist multicentrism.

This way of thinking aligns Kostkowska’s writing with the environmental foundationalism discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. It implies that there is a way things *really are*, and construes philosophical theory as a window through which that reality can be revealed. The construed dependence of poetry upon theory is indicative of a philosophical self-image for which no assignment is too large, and for which theory has a central place in the evolution of society. I argue that theory has no such place, and that the relationship between of dependence between theory and poetry should be reversed. I suggest that we treat Szymborska’s poetry as metaphor rather than as representations of a theory, and her reluctance to certainty as a salute to poetry rather than an expression of philosophical multicentrism. That way, we may conceive of her poems as creative redescriptions of the world rather than corrections of our current worldviews, and salute them for their novelty rather than for their correctness.

From a Rortyan perspective, Kostkowska’s conception of ecofeminist theory implies a mixing of tools which work best while kept separate. The writings of both Szymborska and Kostkowska convey descriptions which break with established convictions, and accordingly comply with what Rorty calls private language use (Rorty 1999: xiv). Szymborska’s writings constitute a poetic and

metaphoric proposal of a *new* vocabulary, rather than arguments within the old one. Kostkowska's theoretical writings, however, claim validity as *literal* language use. When such validity is not obtainable within our current final vocabulary, she turns her critique towards the latter, deeming it "artificial" and "unnatural", thus claiming some sort of undistorted knowledge of the *real* and the *natural*. To put it in Rortyan terms, this perspective resembles the attempt to "find a metavocabulary which somehow takes account of *all possible vocabularies*" (Rorty 1999: xvi). As contributions to the field of ecocentric theory, Kostkowska's writings can obtain validity to the extent to which peers are in agreement about their conception about "the real" and "the natural". As arguments within the public debate, however, her writings have little weight. As arguments which share no common ground with the convictions of the public, all she can do is argue that we should replace our convictions. The public, however, does not share the convictions behind such replacement. Arguments are instances of *public* vocabularies, which presuppose a common ground upon which to argue. An confrontational attack on the common ground of the vocabulary one is trying to change is therefore likely to be in vain. There is no metavocabulary from which one might determine the "natural" vocabularies from the "artificial".

The poet, on the other hand, has the advantage of not asking for validity. She does not attack our final vocabularies on common ground, but writes in order to invent *new* final vocabularies in which things might look different. Although poetry is private in the sense that it does not *make sense* as part of our existing language, it has the possibility of being taken up in habitual use, thereby *replacing* our final vocabulary with a new one. Thus, while argumentative critique is constrained to the frames of a given vocabulary, metaphorical poetry (in the Rortyan sense) is the act of creating *new* vocabularies. Theory and critique are ways of coping with the shared convictions within such vocabularies. To the extent that the environmental problem is an ethical problem, and to which its solution depends on a new ethic, ethical theory is at best an inefficient tool for the task at hand.

Ethical theories that are embraced by the public are not thusly received because of their universal validity or philosophical authority, but because they are good expressions of the convictions we already hold. The contributions within environmental foundationalism are good examples of theories which *lack* such a relation to shared convictions. As private and intra-disciplinary writings, they fail to contribute to the public debate altogether. Whether they are accepted, declined or ignored by the public, ethical summaries are not likely to bring about *new* public convictions. The metaphorical character of Szymborskas Poetry, on the other hand, opens up the possibility of new vocabularies and perspectives in which different convictions might emerge.

### **3.5.2 The vocabulary of the land – Leopold as poet**

In the introduction to *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There*, Robert Finch asserts that if Leopold had stopped after the nature-descriptive essays of the book's part 1, it would have been "a slim, minor classic of graceful and perceptive natural-history narratives" (Finch 1987: xix). I would like to extend this proposition by saying that if Leopold had stopped just before the introduction of his philosophical theory of the Land Ethic, his writings could be read as narrative redescriptions of nature rather than as mere illustrations and arguments for a philosophical position called "the land ethic".

Evidently, not all readers of Leopold consider him a theoretical ethicist with a preference for aesthetic illustrations<sup>6</sup>. However, the way his writings have been incorporated in the field of environmental ethics, notably by J. Baird Callicott, indicates a perspective for which nature-narratives are nice enough, but for which what really matters is the philosophical discovery that gives them ethical force. When Callicott takes on the task of elaborating and advocating the insights of Leopold, his project appears to be one of compensating for the philosophical shortcomings of *A Sand County Almanac*. He observes that in spite of the

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<sup>6</sup> See Paul 1992

appearance of mere “miscellany”, the book does indeed embody a “distilled essence” which, due to the lack of philosophical training, is expressed as descriptions and illustrations rather than pure philosophical arguments (Callicott 1989: 5). On Callicott’s reading, Leopold’s narrative descriptions are a “thoughtful amateur’s” layman attempts to express a philosophical idea for which he lacks the proper language:

[...] precisely because Leopold’s acquaintance with the history and methods of philosophy was only that of a roundly educated gentleman, the metaphysical and axiological implications of ecology are incompletely expressed in his literary legacy, however true his insights. [...] I wanted to flesh out the arguments which Leopold himself only evoked and to connect his ideas, especially his ethical ideas, with antecedents in the history of Western philosophy echoing his rich literary allusions. (Callicott 1989:5-6)

Although Callicott champions Leopold’s ideas as insightful and valuable, he fears that the literary and unsystematic “miscellany” through which they are expressed will sabotage their significance as environmental critique. To Callicott, it seems, literary description is an unnecessary detour and a complication of what could be kept quite simple and clear. Because he is himself more than acquainted with the “history and methods of philosophy”, however, he can achieve the influence which the *Almanac* cannot attain on its own. Callicott’s project, therefore, is to purify Leopold’s position in philosophical terms, by substituting the contextual and narrative focus with philosophical arguments and validity claims.

In this point, there is an evident parallel between the thoughts Callicott and Justyna Kostkowska. Both engage with literary works as though they were codes to be deciphered, or as though they were clumsy ways of stating what the philosopher could simply assert. Callicott confirms the foundationalist’s belief in theory when he announces that his project is “to build, from the ground up, new ethical (and metaphysical) paradigms” (Callicott 1989: 4). His own ethical paradigm is a theory in which Leopold’s land ethic is construed as an “ecocentrism” in which the value of singular entities are determined according to their relation to the whole of the ecosystem (Callicott 1989:28). The

philosophical elaborations of Leopold's insights, then, amount to a systematic ecocentric theory in which all value is neatly ordered and categorized, seemingly ready for political ratification and popular acceptance. Callicott has spent several decades arguing for this theory in books, articles, debates and lectures. In this thesis I will leave most of his work uncommented, but simply remark the following: Although Callicott has been successful in building his new paradigm and spreading it across philosophy departments in many countries, very few people in the Western world have come to consider the value of persons, animals and other creatures as determined by virtue of their place in an ecological system. We have not seen a global shift of societies becoming ecocentric. Arguably, although he would sharply disagree, Callicott serves as a good example of theory's lacking connection with social change. Because Callicott's reading of *The Sand County Almanac* is just one amongst many, however, the case is not as grim for Aldo Leopold's writings.

Leopold's advantage over Callicott (apart from the fact that his book has sold over two millions copies<sup>7</sup>) is similar to that of Szymborska's over Kostkowska. Like Szymborska, he is concerned about the state of the planet, and troubled by the tendency to ignore such concerns in our craving for the bigger and the better. They both take the environmental problem (although none of them use this word in their creative writings) to be, at least partly, an ethical problem, and hope that a change in ethical perspective can be part of the solution. Lastly, they both hope that their writings can open up the mind of the reader to new ways of conceiving of nature, and to perspectives from which our current practices appear unreasonable and unwarranted.

Unlike Kostkowska and Callicott, however, they do not present their descriptions as arguments and theories for which they claim validity. Leopold's more "logical" essays in part 3 of his book are not presented as theoretical foundations of his literature, but rather as "some of the ideas whereby we dissenters

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<sup>7</sup> See The Leopold Foundation (2014)

rationalize our dissent” (Leopold 1987: viii). This dissent, furthermore, is not presented as the outcome of some special insight or idea, but simply refers to the mindset of those who cannot “live without wild things” (Leopold 1987: vii). Leopold’s perspective stands sharply in contrast to that of his most eager advocate. While Callicott aims at the universal and absolute, and construes theory as the foundation of practices and literature, Leopold conceives his own theories as attempts to rationalize his dispositions and desires. In Rorty’s words, they are summarizations of the thick, detailed and integrated perspective of his nature writing. Whereas Callicott aims to solve the environmental crisis with philosophical method and argument, Leopold wonders whether “a shift of values can be achieved by reappraising things unnatural, tame and confined in terms of things natural, wild and free” (Leopold 1987: ix). Callicott prescribes values. Leopold offers redescrptions.

Arguably, the most interesting redescrptions in *A Sand County Almanac* are those for which Callicott shows the least interest. In the first part of his book (the actual “almanac”), Leopold offers narratives descriptions which promote new and unfamiliar perspectives on nature. They constitute an attempt to further a “reappraising” of nature by which our values and convictions might change. The snow in January, for example, “falls in order that mice may build subways from stack to stack”, and “melts in order that hawks may again catch mice” (Leopold 1987:4). In his little narratives about various animals and processes in nature, Leopold opens up perspectives and descriptions that are absent in the modern city. He fears that our modern world of greed and growth-fixation brings us out of tune with nature, and attempts to reintroduce the perspectives that have become lost in such a world:

There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace. (Leopold 1987: 6)

The spiritual danger he is talking about is our increasing tendency to distance ourselves from nature and the land, and to isolate ourselves in communities



exclusively for human beings. Leopold tries to compensate for this distance, for instance by writing extensively about the history behind every growth ring that appears when cutting a giant oak tree into firewood. He introduces us to the life and history that can be seen in nature, if one looks closely: “[...] he who owns a veteran bur oak owns more than a tree. He owns a historical library, and a reserved seat in the theater of evolution” (Leopold 1987: 30).

The almanac is an invitation to reconnect with the detailed narratives by which nature can be conceived, but which are increasingly losing ground in the hasty consumer’s life of urban modernity. Without the perspective of the land, nature is reduced to objects of utility. Leopold’s aim is to offer descriptions of nature and ourselves, and ways of relating to nature, which might shift our focus and alter our dispositions. In the second part of the book, Leopold combines such nature-narratives with stories of short-sighted and voracious human cultivation, illustrating the consequences of ecological ignorance and narrow-minded extension. In “Wisconsin”, a detailed and enthusiastic story of the march of the cranes is gradually interrupted by the story of how politicians and industrialists sabotage this habitat by adapting the land to human needs (Leopold 1987: 96-101). The shift between Part 1 and Part 2 introduces a transition from descriptive nature-narrative to social and political criticism, without, however, leaving the narrative perspective.

The three-part structure of Leopold’s book is interesting in the sense that it illustrates the significance that narratives and new descriptions can have for ethical changes. The first part can be read as the attempt to establish a new vocabulary – a *land vocabulary* – a way of seeing and describing the world in which the perspectives of the mouse, moose, geese and cranes are part of our narratives. In the second part of the book, human practices and their consequences are narratively redescribed, within this new vocabulary, as causes of ecological harm. In other essays, the vocabulary sheds new light on human discourse practices which, although they are not *directly* harmful, serve to

maintain the narrow perspective on nature which justifies ecological mistreatment (Leopold 1987: 153).

Part three, consisting of diverse essays in which the narrative tone and perspective is less prominent, amounts to an ethical and cultural critique of our modern society and its relation to non-human nature. This section of the book arguably makes up a theoretical element of Leopold's book, as it contemplates on, and criticizes, general cultural relations to wild life and the recreational transformations of wilderness (1987: 177-179, 192-193). The section ends with the famous "The Land Ethic", an ethical essay in which an ecological moral imperative, together with notions like "ethical extension" and "ecological conscience", is presented as an alternative to the prevailing convictions of anthropocentrism.

There is no reason to disagree with Callicott that the Land Ethic amounts to an ethical theory. It seems, however, that Leopold himself would disagree with Callicott about what an ethical theory is. Leopold's descriptions of his "more logical" writings as "some of the ideas by which we dissenters rationalize our dissent" (Leopold 1987: viii) is quite parallel to Rorty's description of theory as *thin summaries* of the thick and narrative. Arguably, the structure of *The Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There* constitutes a gradual "thinning down" of the thick, concrete and engaged narratives of the first part. Thus read, the theoretical and ethical reflections of the Land Ethic express a summary of the descriptions and convictions that appear in the vocabulary which emerges in the earlier parts of the book. Leopold's hope is that reengaging with nature, and its multitudes of different perspectives, might provide us with an outlook from which our practices are given new light, and through which our ethical dispositions might change. His narrative focus is not the outcome, as Callicott would have it, of his lack of philosophical skills, but rather of the recognition that nothing starts with a summary. His own experiences with the wild and the land had inspired him to think differently, and so he wants to share such experiences

and encourage his readers to strive for the sensibility through which such thoughts arise.

As I read Leopold, he hopes that sensibility to such experiences through a reappraisal of the land, and the substitution of a land vocabulary for the vocabulary of growth and consumption, can bring about an extension of our ethical boundaries, as expressed in the “Golden Rule”:

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise. (Leopold 1987: 224-225)

Contrary to Callicott, I suggest that we do not conceive this rule as a philosophical axiom, but rather as the most general and “thin” way to express the attitudes comprised in a certain perspective. Leopold does not believe that the proposal of such a rule will change our ethical convictions. Rather, the Golden Rule summarizes an attitude which he hopes to be the next step in the ethical progress of our societies. Leopold’s description of an ongoing ethical evolution as “intellectual as well as emotional process” (Leopold 1987: 225) resembles Rorty’s description of moral progress as “a matter of remarking our human selves so as to enlarge the variety of relationships which constitute those selves” (Rorty 1999: 79). Like Rorty, Leopold conceives moral progress as an adaptive feature of our societies, and as a matter of increasing *sensitivity* rather than increasing moral knowledge through argumentative exchange (Leopold 1987: 203, Rorty 1999: 81).

From a Rortyan perspective, *A Sand County Almanac* is an attempt to establish a land-sensitive vocabulary in which concern for the wellbeing of the biotic community is a natural part, along with that of humans and animals. This vocabulary is sought in narrative redescriptions of animals, plants, ecological relations and human practices, which depart from the framework of our common descriptions and convictions. The notion of an *ethical extension* expressed in the theoretical parts of Leopold’s book is interesting because it summarizes the literary *extension of perspective* that takes place within its narrative chapters.

Thus conceived, the Land Ethic is not an attempt to “build” a new ethic, but an ethical summary of a new way of seeing the world.

To the extent that the environmental crisis can be ameliorated by moral progress through ethical extension, we depend on poets and writers (and movie directors, journalists, and so on) to offer us new descriptions – new ways of conceiving the natural world – by which we may alter our ways of talking of and acting towards nature. This is the project of both Wislawa Szymborska and Aldo Leopold. However, although both take use of literary redescription in their attempt to contribute to the improvement of environmental conditions, their approaches differ with regards to style and focus. Szymborska directly addresses the ethical convictions which rationalize the environmental degradation by our societies. By posing the question, *are you really sure that these plants and stones have no feelings*, and by construing a perspective in which they indeed do, she challenges the rationalizations of our nature-exploitative culture. Her ethical extension consists of widening the concept of suffering – a concept which is central to our society’s moral convictions.

Leopold, on the other hand, is less directly ethical in his literary descriptions, and relies on his readers to engage in detailed, narrative descriptions of the members and relations of the land. Leopold’s extension is one of sensitivity to processes and relations to which we are becoming ignorant in our predominantly consumptive society. These authors are not asking us to embrace a new philosophy or a new theory of values, but rather to join them in the exploration of new perspectives and vocabularies which might enable and inspire us to change our practices.

## 4. Vocabularies of the environment

### 4.1 Introduction: Literary hopes and practical aims

Throughout the preceding chapters of this thesis, the environmental crisis is approached in terms of a moral problem concerning our ability to appreciate and care about nature. This amounts to a discussion of how we can understand the proclaimed need for a new ethic, and of the ways in which such a process might be brought about. The preceding chapter is an attempt to fill the void that appears after abandoning the idea that philosophy can provide the required changes by way of argument. The turn towards environmental narratives and poetry is inspired by the Rortyan idea that moral progress is about sentimental experiences of new kinds of suffering, and the thought that narrative literature carries the ability to give us such experiences.

Where the environmental foundationalists aim to provide new insights and values, writers such as Leopold and Szymborska offer new perspectives, experiences and vocabularies. They have the potential to awake new sympathies and thereby to change the way we conceive ourselves and our relations to nature. As such, these writers are environmentalist versions of Rorty's ironic protagonist, "[hoping], by this continual redescription, to make the best selves for ourselves that we can" (Rorty 1989: 80). Rorty's substitution of poetry and narratives for theory and philosophy is closely connected to the substitution of *hope* for knowledge. Giving up on philosophy as engine of social change implies giving up on the certainty and predictability of moral progress. Since we cannot *argue* for the perspectives of Leopold and Szymborska, we are left with the hope that their metaphors will turn into new moral vocabularies, and that these vocabularies will be better tools for attaining environmentally sustainable ways of life.

However, there is a sense in which the ironic hope of new and better vocabularies seems unsatisfying to our aim of acceleration of environmental solutions. Presuming that hope alone will not change the world, it is tempting to say that neither will moral progress, unless we find ways to connect them to our concrete actions and practices. Although we cannot be *certain* about moral progress, and that there is no point in trying to *justify* the directions we want it to take, there may still be ways to *promote* its practical realization. Although Rorty himself rarely goes beyond the ironist hope of the literary critic, there are passages in which he addresses the risks of leaning too heavily on cultural changes and new ideals. In these passages, Rorty points out that our convictions must not only be changed, but also *achieved*.

In this chapter, I discuss this issue with reference to the perspective of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, and to the relations between environmental convictions and environmental practice in Norway. As such, this chapter is an attempt to bridge a Rortyan conception of environmental ethics with a broader, practical understanding of the environmental crisis. I argue that we should distinguish the tools for moral progress that are directed at the extension of communities and moral selves, from tools aim at *achieving* our ideals and convictions. While the former are a matter of attaining cultural change by virtue of creating new vocabularies, the latter are a matter of *practical* change through making our vocabularies more efficient.

## 4.2 Achieving our ideals

In *Achieving our Country*, Rorty addresses the tendency of the American cultural left to pursue profound cultural change while losing the focus on concrete policy (1998b:78). Rorty notes that while legislation on discrimination and on what he calls "sadism" has not changed since the sixties, the cultural left has had significant success in creating less discriminating vocabularies:

This change is largely due to the hundreds of thousands of teachers who have done their best to make their students understand the humiliation which previous generations of Americans have inflicted on their fellow citizens. By assigning Toni Morrison's *Beloved* instead of George Elliot's *Silas Marner* in high school literature classes, and by assigning stories about the suicides of gay teenagers in freshman composition courses, these teachers have made it harder for their students to be sadistic than it was for those students' parents. (Rorty 1998b: 81)

At first glance, the anti-sadistic cultural work by the American cultural left appear to illustrate quite well what we need in order for writers such as Leopold and Szymborska to obtain the changes we hope for. It exemplifies how experiences of new kinds of sufferings can change our vocabularies and convictions, and appears to fuel the hopes of establishing environmental convictions through literary work and distribution. However, Rorty's description has another side:

During the same period [...] economic inequality and economic insecurity have steadily increased. It is as if the American Left could not handle more than one initiative at a time – as if it either had to ignore stigma in order to concentrate on money, or vice versa. (Rorty 1998b:83)

The environmental parallel to this point is that deep cultural changes in the way we conceive and value nature constitute no guarantee for sustainable practice through policy changes. Arguably, the discrepancy which Rorty describes between cultural attitude-changes and concrete policy changes has its parallel in the environmental domain. Although it has become commonly accepted that the climate changes are connected to human practices, and that something must be done to stop them, the concrete changes are few and feeble.

This contrast is particularly evident in Norway, where a majority believe global warming to be a serious problem, and are concerned about pollution and degradation of ecosystems and species (Listhaug & Jacobsen 2008), while consumption rates and emissions show no significant decline (Statistisk Sentralbyrå 2014; Statistisk Sentralbyrå 2013). Across discourses within politics, business, media and education, environmental issues and values appear to be stable parts of the general dialogue, and there are few public organizations or

parties which do not conceive environmental problems as a vast and anthropogenic crisis. In short, the Norwegian public seems to have integrated (at least some) environmental values and perspectives into its common convictions, indicating that we have attained at least some of the moral progress towards which we are aiming. Environmental values have attained a place even in the Constitution of Norway, where §110b reads:

Everyone has the right to an environment which ensures healthiness, and to a nature whose production capability and diversity is preserved. The use of natural resources should be administered in agreement with a long-sighted and comprehensive consideration which attends to this right for common generations as well as for contemporary generations.

In order to ensure their right stated in the preceding section, citizens are entitled to knowledge of the state of the natural environment and of the consequences of planned and initiated interventions in nature.

The government will specify regulations for the executions of these principles.  
(NOU 2000, my translation)

At first glance, this paragraph appears to exemplify what Rorty's cultural left has failed in attaining, namely an enactment of our convictions through changes in policy and regulation. The paragraph arguably accords well with the Norwegian attitudes described above. It determines as an individual right, both for current and future generations, a diverse nature and a healthy environment, and proscribes that all use of natural resources be in accordance with these criteria. However, the question is whether these principles are apt to transformation into actual policy. Although they specify a requirement of shared information, the paragraph is too vague and abstract to have practical effect. Without practical regulations, incentive structures and concrete directions, this enactment arguably has no practical significance other than as a "thin" summary of our environmental convictions. Accordingly, this law is more of an instance of ethical theory (in the Rortyan sense), than it is policy regulating our environmental practices.

The existence of this paragraph, and the results from public surveys noted above, is undoubtedly a sign that we are on the right track. Environmental concerns



amongst politicians, researchers and the majority of the Norwegian public indicate that the direction of our recent moral progress has been environmentally favorable, be it the result of literature, public campaigns or educational reforms. Nevertheless, the continued level of consumption, oil production, and nature intervention reveals that this progress has yet to be reflected in practice. The gap between environmental convictions and environmental action indicates that although moral progress may be effective and possibly even necessary, it does not on its own ensure concrete changes in practice and policy.

Along with metaphorical works of poetry and literature aimed at creating environmentally sentient vocabularies, it is crucial that we maintain pressure on the *public* debate on policy and economy. In addition to the poetic cultural engineering, and the efforts by teachers, journalists and others to introduce new vocabularies, we must also maintain the environmental perspective in *argumentative* contributions, and work towards concrete improvements of our practices. In other words, it is vital that we manage to do two things at once. As we continuously redescribe ourselves and our ideals, we must also continuously work to *achieve* the self-descriptions and ideals which we embrace.

Although Rorty addresses this aspect in some of his works, his perspectives on moral progress rarely touch upon the challenges that must be dealt with on the *inside* of our vocabularies. Arguably, the history of the human rights culture which Rorty describes (1998a:170) is not only a history of moral progress, but also of the continuous, challenging process of institutional, practical and political adaptations to new moral convictions. Although women in western societies may have achieved moral equality, they are still fighting against barriers such as unequal salaries and informal hierarchies which do not automatically change in accordance with moral inclusion. Women have won their legal and moral equality, but they are still fighting to achieve their *practical* equality. Similarly, environmentalists are struggling against rhetorical, institutional and political obstacles from the reduction of carbon dioxide and ecological degradation. This

struggle is less of a debate over moral convictions than it is a matter of practical implications, normative hegemonies and political prioritization.

Among environmentalist authors that have influenced policy by challenging our concrete practices, Rachel Carson is especially noteworthy. In her *Silent Spring* (1991), she offers a thorough and well-written description of the consequences of using chemical substances as a means to control and manipulate nature. This book is interesting because it has made a significant impact on the public debate and pesticide policy (Murphy 2005), and because although she sharply criticizes the image of the earth as made “for the convenience of man” (Carson 1991: 257), her book is not primarily an attack on our ethical convictions. *Silent Spring* is an attempt to bring to light the complex and long-term consequences of human practices which are motivated by short-term benefits. As such, Carson’s attempts to ask us if we are willing to endanger so much for the sake of shortsighted economic gain. It is an attempt to inform our existing ethical convictions with new insights, and accordingly provoke change by establishing as knowledge that which is unacceptable to our convictions. She writes:

If we would divert to constructive research even a small fraction of the money spent each year on the development of ever more toxic sprays, we could find ways to use less dangerous materials and to keep poisons out of our waterways. When will the public become sufficiently aware of the facts to demand such actions? (Carson 1991:141)

Carson’s aims to increase such awareness, and thus hasten the demand for policy change. To embrace her call for action does not require a particularly environmental ethic. As human beings, we represent the top of the food chain, and are amongst the most affected by irreversible toxic emissions on land and seas. This feature gives Carson an advantage over many environmentalist writers, who share the tendency of environmental philosophers to demand a shift in our basic convictions. To alter our accepted knowledge about pesticides and insecticides, on the contrary, has little, if anything, to do with overturning basic convictions.

Arguably, Carson's criticism is not aimed at our ethical convictions, and does not primarily address the conscience and responsibility of the individual reader. Although she wants her readers to react, she does not expect them, as consumers, to simply stop using pesticides and insecticides where these are now necessary means of sustenance. Rather, her aim is to provoke the public to *demand policy changes*. As such, Carson's contribution is argumentative rather than metaphorical, and directed towards our policy rather than our convictions. Arguably, this is part of the explanation of *Silent Spring*'s influence on concrete policy changes. This is not to say that the works of writers such as Szymborska and Leopold have no part to play. To the extent that Carson's influence has to do with the ethically uncontroversial nature of her writings, her efforts cannot be aligned with those of Leopold or Szymborska. They have a different aim and are using different tools. As environmental poets and narrators, they use the tool of metaphorical redescription in order to offer *new* vocabularies which may give rise to cultural changes, parallel to that of the cultural left.

However, in addition to the cultural engineering of new vocabularies and convictions, we need scientists, activists, journalists and others to point out discrepancies between our current convictions and our actual practice. Such efforts are not a matter of creating new vocabularies or extending our loyalties, but rather of working to achieve our common convictions and making our vocabularies more efficient. *Silent Spring* is an example of literature which addresses concrete policy and institutional change with the hope of shortening the distance between our convictions and our practices. It is an attempt to promote the achievement of our convictions by improving the practical efficiency of our normal discourse – the public discourse on the environment.

### 4.3 The environment as “hyperobject”

Arguably, Carson's influence on our practices is partly due to her ability to express the pressing nature of the problem at hand without paralyzing us with its

grandeur and complexity. Although she describes the ecological consequences as complex, critical and extensive, she does not overload her readers with the weight of these problems, but keeps the political precept quite simple: If we change policies and regulation regarding pesticide use, many of these problems will at least stop accelerating. However, the features of Carson's writings which allow for this simple and pragmatic attitude are not so simple when the topic of pesticide use is replaced with problems such as global warming. One difference is the role of human beings both as sources and as victims of the problem at hand. In the case of pesticides, human beings are among the most exposed to the consequences of environmental poison, and the consequences may be soon to appear. In the case of global warming, on the other hand, the consequences are disputed, complex and distant in time. Its causes are manifold, complicated and related to a considerable part of our current practices. A second difference is that while improvement to pesticide practices were readily available in the form of technological progress and small scale restrictions, the solutions to global warming seem to require long-term and radical changes in the core practices and habits of human life on earth. Although the consequences of pesticides are indeed complex, they are both visible, concrete and impending compared to the consequences of carbon emissions. Arguably, the use of pesticides and its consequences constitute only small part in a complex web of interrelated processes and consequences – the vast aggregation of events we refer to as the environmental crisis.

Perhaps it is the vastness and complexity of the environmental crisis that engenders the apparent gap between our attitudes and practices, the discrepancy which stands in the way of achieving our environmental ideals. This gap, referred to as a *value-action gap* or an *attitude-behavior gap*, is the focus of various research projects on environmental behavior, reaching from anthropology to psychology. Stewart Barr (2006), for example, observes a clear gap between intentions and willingness to reduce waste, on the one hand, and the habits of consumption and recycling on the other:

The occurrence of a series of environmental crises and sustained governmental campaigns to increase environmental action have resulted in a steady rise in public awareness of environmental problems. Yet the transformation of such consciousness into action clearly relates to more than awareness. [...] Consequently, waste reduction, despite being an aspiration of the general public, has yet to become normative behavior. (Barr 2006: 51)

As Barr notes, our ability to change our behavioral patterns and practices depend on more than environmental convictions and ecological knowledge. One difference between waste reduction and pesticide reduction is that the latter is a matter of concrete changes with concrete results, while the former requires changes in consumption patterns amongst large groups in order to have effect. While Carson's project of pesticide reduction requires only political support and technological efforts while offering a safer environment for current generations, waste recycling requires individual efforts, and may at its best make life better for generations in a distant future, provided that everyone contributes. The story of poisoned drinking water is simple and near. The story of a less habitable planet some centuries ahead is unclear, distant and difficult to grasp.

The vastness of the climate changes is what makes Timothy Morton categorize them as a "hyperobject" – a thing that is so big, complex and different from what we normally conceive as an object, that it evades our normal understanding of things (Morton 2010). Morton writes:

Plutonium is truly astonishing to contemplate. We think of light as neutral or benign. Radiation is poisoned light. We think of "objects" as passive and inert, as "over there." Just by existing, this hyperobject affects living tissue. [...] Humans have manufactured materials that are already beyond the normal scope of our comprehension. (Morton 2010: 130-131)

Morton's point is that our current ways of thinking, especially about nature and the environment, are not adapted to the emergence of hyperobjects in our collective consciousness. Although we talk about them, our present ways of dealing with the world in general and the climate in particular, fall short in the face of the vastness and complexity of a hyperobject. In other words, while our thoughts and actions are local and contemporary, the important issues of today

are global and perpetual. His criticism of environmentalists, politicians, philosophers and consumers seems to be that their various ways of talking about nature and environment (both concepts which he wishes to abandon) are attempts to transform them into normal *objects* – of construing hyperobjects in phrases and images which make them comprehensible in our existing worldviews. Rather than adapting the descriptions of hyperobjects to our frames of understanding, Morton upholds that we must rather adapt our thoughts to the hyperobjects, thinking bigger and digging deeper into *the ecological thought*:

Far from rubbishing deep ecology as a religious objectification, we should take its claims more seriously than it takes them, and go even deeper, deeper into the mesh. We are only just beginning to think the ecological thought. [...] The ecological thought can be highly unpleasant. But once you have started to think it, you can't unthink it. We have started to think it. In the future, we will all be thinking the ecological thought. (Morton 2010: 134-135)

Although the scope of Morton's undertaking, as expressed in these paragraphs, is arguably well adapted to the dimensions of hyperobjects, the objective of his own writings seems somewhat unclear. On the one hand, a radical critique of environmental discourses is directed towards the insufficiency and lacking depth of our vocabularies. On the other hand, his aim of a profoundly ecological culture, one in which we comprehend and cope with the hyperobjects we have created, is construed as a historical necessity. It is possible that this apparent contradiction is simply an assertion of the slowness and patchiness of social change. Nevertheless, Morton's confined perspective on deep and radical cultural changes displays a lack of willingness to, or a disbelief in, addressing the climate change as a practical problem which can have practical solutions. Perhaps it is this confinement to deep cultural patterns that leads him to conclude in a kind of hopeful semi-determinism. If one accepts Morton's premises, however, his hopefulness seems more far-fetched than his cultural dissatisfaction.

Fortunately, we need not accept all of Morton's premises. We can appreciate his descriptions of climate change and environmental crisis as hyperobjects, and agree with him that we are far from adapting to these ethical and conceptual

challenges. In fact, his conception of ecological progress is quite similar to what writers such as Aldo Leopold and Wislawa Szymborska are aiming to bring about. Morton's proposal to think bigger and deeper implies describing environmental problems as more complex and vast, thus approaching the hyperobject of climate change in its fullest possible form. I agree that the new challenges of global warming and environmental degradation call for an extension of our perspectives on our lives and our relations to the rest of the planet, and we may well conceive of such progress as the development of "the ecological thought". However, since these changes imply the emergence of new vocabularies, perspectives and values, their establishment depends on tools other than that of argument and theoretical critique. Developing the ecological thought towards understanding, and coping with, the magnitude and complexity of hyperobjects could be a description of Leopold's intentions in *A Sand County Almanac*. As I have argued, Leopold's ecological extension of ethics is subsequent to an extension of our perspectives on and vocabularies of nature. In Rortyan-Mortonian terms, such extension could be construed as a matter of redescribing nature as a hyperobject, leaving our simple and anthropocentric descriptions of nature behind.

However, I disagree with Morton's premise that the hyper-character of these problems renders them unapproachable within a culture that is not thoroughly ecological in its basic perspectives and convictions. Although it might be the case that our current vocabularies, discourses and practices are not prepared to cope with hyperobjects, it is also the case that the description of these challenges *as* hyperobjects is only one among many possible descriptions. The invention of deeper and more ecological vocabularies is a poetic and metaphorical process, and not a matter of public debate. On the contrary, it seems that the orientation of our public debates towards hyperobjective cluster concepts such as "global warming" or "environmental crisis" may be *too* hyper in order for us to relate them to our daily practices.

Although there are no *necessary* limits to the perspectives, worldviews and moral convictions we can achieve, there are certainly *practical* limits to what we actually value and comprehend. We may hope to evolve towards a culture where the complexity of ecosystems is internalized within common sense, and in which our sympathies have reached beyond the nearness of family, the human race and the recognition of physical pain. However, asserting that the environment is *really* a hyperobject is the same as saying that ecosystems *really* have intrinsic value. Instead of working towards a new vocabulary, Morton attacks our current final vocabularies with arguments about the inadequacy of its conceptions. Since his arguments do not share the premises of our public environmental vocabularies, however, they have little value as a contribution to the public discourse. I suggest we take the ironist's approach to criticism, and give up the attempt to change our final vocabularies by way of argument. Since we have not, at least so far, become a culture which understands and manages to cope with the hyperobjective environment, it makes sense to construe our problems, efforts and goals *within* the framework and perspective of our current vocabularies.

As we have seen, cultural changes in the form of moral progress or increased awareness are no guarantee of practical changes. Cultural and moral progress towards "the ecological thought" does not ensure the ecological transformation of our policy and practices. And even if it did, our communities currently seem to be far from thinking it. Perhaps it would be more efficient, and more practical, to leave the hyperobjective depths and grandeur of the environment to poetic writers, and address the public discourse on the environment with *less* global, less complex and less unintelligible descriptions. Rorty makes a similar point:

[...] our sense of solidarity is strongest when those with whom solidarity is expressed are thought of as "one of us," where "us" means something smaller and more local than the human race. That is why "because she is a human being" is a weak, unconvincing explanation of a generous action. (Rorty 1989: 191)

As I read Rorty, his point is not that we can never be motivated to sympathy or benevolence simply by the commonality of being human. Rather, he is saying that



while we extend our boundaries of loyalty and sympathy, it will still be the case that some members of our moral communities are *closer* to us than others. The “we-intentions” of my own family, the smallest and nearest of all my moral communities, are stronger than those of my city, country or common human beings (Rorty 1989: 194-195). Although there are no pre-given limits to the future of our moral communities, moral motivation will be stronger in the small and more local communities than in the global communities of humanity, living organisms, or ecosystems. Since we arguably do not, as yet, perceive ourselves as members of the eco-community of life on earth, it is hard to see how we are to be *motivated* by such conceptions. Arguably, although the hyperobjective environment may be conceivable as an intellectual idea, it will take more redescription, more cultural adaptation, before it can prompt us to action.

Developing the ecological thought is a matter of changing our ideals. *Achieving* our ideals, however, is a matter of choosing the descriptions that are close and local enough in order to motivate. Redescribing the problems at hand in terms that are local, concrete and thematically limited might reify our convictions and thus lessen the gap between them and our practices. The next section is an attempt to suggest some ways of achieving practical reification of the environmental crisis through pragmatic adjustments of our environmental vocabularies. This section is not about attaining new environmental ideals, but about *achieving* those which we already embrace.

#### 4.4 Environmental vocabularies and the achievement of our ideals

The public debate about the environment is characterized by a multitude of different perspectives, opinions and levels of abstraction merged into a single discourse. The technical and academic language of the Climate Panel is mingled with vague and confrontational political statements, solemn environmental organizations, and the self-righteousness of “green” business-leaders, all pointing

fingers at each other and rarely leaving us less confused. The complex and impersonal nature of the environmental crisis is boosted by daily revisions of yesterday's facts and diverse debates over which environmental problem is the most grave and urgent. In fact, the situation is similar to the *philosophical* debate about the environment which has continued since the 1970's, with the exception that the latter, perhaps fortunately, is upheld without full public exposure. As I have argued in this thesis, the philosophical debate over the environment has stagnated in its attempt to answer the question of value in nature, presuming that such an answer will provide us with a *solution*. Similarly, scientists, activists and journalists are continuously fuelling the public environmental discourse with new information, moral arguments and perspectives, with the hope of bringing us closer to environmental practices.

However, it may seem that this project of environmental enlightenment is what establishes the environment as a hyperobject in our public discourses. It is not unlikely that the complexity and grandeur of our environmental descriptions, the knowledge gaps between professional and public environmental discourses and the apparent incommensurability of the various environmental purposes (wilderness preservation vs. wind power, etc.), are simply too much to digest for the individual newspaper reader. Although the environmental crisis is alarming, and its solution pressing, there is a chance that the way we construe it is passivizing rather than engaging. Potentially, the hyperobject of the environment, although conceived of as both alarming and pressing, ends up *not concerning* us, our habits and actions. Perhaps our concern for the hyperobjective environment is becoming more of an intellectual idea than a sentimental reaction.

The public debate is an arena for discussing and achieving our ideals rather than inventing new vocabularies. It could be prudent, therefore, to take use of descriptions of the environmental crisis that are smaller, more local, more concrete and less confusing. If our current vocabularies and perspectives are not capable of dealing with hyperobjects, our public environmental discourse could

be more efficient if we replaced the hyperobjective description of the environmental crisis with descriptions we can relate to without turning to emotional dissociation. Perhaps, if we could combine descriptions of the environmental crisis which are less complex and despairing, with more local, concrete and optimistic descriptions of how we can face it, we would be better suited to grasp and respond to the defining challenge of our time.

One way of doing this is to take some of the environmental complexity out of the public debate. Rather than discussing details about the degree of human blame in global warming, we could stick to the story that since global warming is occurring, and human emissions probably play a part in that process, we should aim towards reducing emissions. And rather than discussing the advantages of diesel over gas engines (or vice versa), we could stick to the simple point that it is a good thing if we reduce our car use. The details can be left to the expertise of scientists and bureaucrats.

Furthermore, instead of addressing car users and consumers with new demands and personal responsibilities, we can learn from Rachel Carson and focus on the policy changes that may provoke the desired effect. It is easier to vote for car use reduction than it is to reduce one's personal car use. After all, we are no longer in the 1950's, and the sense of common goals has arguably decreased over the last decades. Individual actions are perceived less as parts of common practices and more as efforts to diverge from the common. Perhaps this is part of the explanation of the weak connection between concern about common practices and individual effort to change. The decreasing sense of community may have to do with the vast dimension of the "community" of the common projects of today, a community completely different from that of a worker's organization of the 50's. Achieving a "green planet" requires the collective effort of several billion people towards a common goal. A possible consequence of this globalization of the environmental community is that common efforts and responsibilities become

as hyperobjective as the climate crisis itself – too abstract to be related to our personal contribution.

Therefore, it could be an idea to let researchers and novelists worry about the hyperobject described in IPCC reports and Morton's writings, and direct our *public* focus towards the environmental improvements within *smaller* communities. The notions of "green" cities, neighbourhoods or schools might be far more encouraging and effective in terms of normative pressure and personal motivation. This is not to say that we can ignore or abandon international cooperation for a greener planet. It is to say that if the public debate focused more on local efforts and consequences, environmentalism could become more of a local community project and less of a globalized paralysis. Ecological science and nature-writing are tools that deal with the hyperobjective environment, and which aim to change, in the long run, our ways of talking about nature and ourselves. In the public discourse, however, the tools we need are those which simplify and speed up the application of ideals and awareness into actual practice.

Since these distinct tools are used for different purposes, there is no contradiction between them. The solution of the environmental crisis requires change in a number of aspects of our societies. For the continuance of moral progress and long term "ecologization" of our worldviews, narrative literature, poetry and ecological science are probably among the efficient tools. For the achievement of our ethical and cultural convictions, on the other hand, we need other tools. To this end, I suggest that we turn seek redescriptions in which the environmental problems are construed as local, comprehensible and assailable *practical* problems.

An example of the effect of smaller environmental communities is the emergence of eco-trends and other social phenomena which we can call *environmental packages*. The internet is abundant with magazines and blogs about "returning to nature" through simple living, ecological farming and wilderness experiences. Such phenomena are sometimes criticized for disguising egoistic self-realization

projects as environmental activism, and consequently conceived of as misguided environmental efforts. However, if it turns out, as it sometimes does, that these bloggers and trend-subscribers in fact change their consumption patterns, and perhaps even inspire others to do the same, such criticism is pointless as contribution to the public debate. Whether or not they value nature “for its own sake” is a matter of private philosophy, and should be irrelevant to all but hard-core deontologists. What matters in practice is that such phenomena exemplify how small communities manage to achieve their common ideals in practice. The intentional background does not make any practical difference. It would be great if everyone replaced their car with public transportation because of concern for global warming, but it does not make any practical difference if they do so rather out of economical reasoning or in order to improve the air quality of their city.

The development of environmental ideals and vocabularies is the demanding task of creative writers and poets who hope, in the long run, to find a better, ecological, “us”. To *achieve* our environmental ideals may require that we adopt descriptions of ourselves, our practices and our ideals that lessen the gap between intentions and actions. We need to describe ourselves as people who practice what we preach. I have argued that in the public debate on the environment, hyperobjective grandeur and complexity contributes to paralysis rather than inspiration. On the contrary, we need descriptions that construe the alarming and pressing nature of global warming as something intelligible and surmountable. My suggestion is to do this by replacing this grandeur and complexity with descriptions which are closer – smaller and more local – to those we wish to inspire to action. Some might object that this implies embracing an unrealistic and incomplete picture of the problem at hand, and that its gravity will be lost with the big perspectives. However, such grandeur, complexity and gravity are no good if they leave us in resignation and paralysis.

The anticipation of a new, environmental ethic is a matter of *hoping for new ideals*. It is hoping that our current convictions and vocabularies will gradually

succumb to ways of conceiving, valuing, and describing the world, which bring us closer to non-human nature. Although such cultural change is a slow and unpredictable process, we can work towards it by continuing to redescribe human and non-human nature in new ways, narrative or poetic, which increase our awareness and sensitivity to the natural world. Arguably, this process has already started. However, the urgency and gravity of the environmental crisis leaves us too little time to let moral progress run its unsteady and protracted path. The ecologization of our societies will be of little use if it is outrun by the consequences of today's growth and consumption.

New values and perspectives do not necessarily entail new practices. This insight is largely ignored by the proponents of environmental philosophy, be it foundationalists or pragmatists. In Rorty's writings, it is at best vaguely mentioned, and for the most part undiscussed. Perhaps this is due to his efforts to promote revolutionary changes in the discipline of philosophy, and the consequent lack of interest in what goes on *within* it. However, while revolutionary science and redescription of moral boundaries can offer new ways of talking and perceiving, they are not as useful when it comes to changing our ways of *acting*. Practical change in the form of implementation, policy and the substitution of common habits, depend on the efficiency of the tools which our normal discourses make use of in order to transform our common premises into action. New ways of talking are of no use if they fail to bring about new ways of acting. The work of creating new vocabularies must be complimented by the work of making them efficient.

It is crucial that we find ways to narrow the gap between ideals and practices, speeding up the process of achieving our environmental ideals. In addition to reframing the problem at hand and breaking it down into intelligible and approachable aims, we need descriptions of ourselves which bridge the gap between individual action and common practice. In short, we need to replace the stories and descriptions which paralyze and frighten us with stories that engage

us and inspire us to make other choices. The environmental enlightenment project is already pervasive in politics, media and public conversation. The magnitude of the environmental crisis suggests that an even heavier pressure is appropriate. What matters, however, is that we manage to direct and distribute this pressure in ways that promote positivity, motivation and, ultimately, action.

## Conclusion

This thesis is motivated by the apparent stagnation of foundationalist environmental philosophy, and its consequent failure to contribute to our common efforts towards environmental solutions. Various efforts have been made to change and refine the discourse of environmental foundationalism, but although these efforts have brought about new perspectives, they have failed to resolve the standstill. The aim of this thesis, therefore, has been to abandon this entire discourse in order to try out another one.

The Rortyan perspective on *languages as tools* constitutes a vocabulary in which we can construe new descriptions, both of the stagnation of environmental foundationalism, and of the prospects of attaining an environmental ethic. From this perspective, environmental foundationalism is a language game with rules of language use that are distinct from other vocabularies. Reaching objectivity for an environmental foundationalist is a matter of attaining agreement for her arguments *within* this vocabulary. If such objectivity were to emerge, it would still be internal to the vocabulary of environmental foundationalism. The Rortyan conception of language lets us see the difference between various languages, disciplines and discourses, as horizontal rather than vertical.

The notion of providing a foundation depends on the degree to which certain ways of using language amount to “deeper” insights than others. The philosophical version of this notion aims towards insight to the necessary and the unconditional. To Rorty, however, “the necessary” and “unconditional” nature of certain propositions denote nothing more than the broad acceptance of these propositions on the inside of a language game. There is no necessity on the *outside* of language, and accordingly no criterion of choice *between* vocabularies which does not itself originate in a vocabulary. By aiming beyond the realm of socially integrated opinions and perspectives, environmental foundationalism is a vocabulary which refuses to be a vocabulary. I have argued that this refusal,



along with the failure to attain discursive agreement, amounts to part of the reason why environmental foundationalism has failed to reach its goal of contributing to our common environmental efforts. Environmental foundationalism is a way of talking which, as it turns out, has not brought us closer to the goals it was aiming for.

Rorty's conception of *theories as summaries* places ethical theory on the inside of a historically and socially situated vocabulary. It lets us conceive of theory as a particular way of relating to the common convictions and accepted knowledge on the inside of a language game, namely by summarizing its broadly accepted assumptions and normative convictions. Theories which are accepted as objective are successful attempts at providing such summaries. They are successful not by virtue of representing the "real world out there" to us, but by virtue of describing our own descriptions and convictions in a generalized manner. As theory rests on agreement, it is not by itself a tool for social change. Although theories can surely be enlightening and enhance consciousness of our own convictions, they are not means to provide us with *new* values and convictions. As I have argued, the theories within environmental foundationalism are theories which do *not* express our common convictions and values. Although they may summarize the convictions internal to their own vocabulary, they fail to relate to the convictions of the public.

The environmental foundationalists aim to construe and establish a new ethical system which would push our practices and actions in an environmentally sustainable direction. They conceive of our failure to face environmental challenges as a sign that we need to change on a "deeper" level. In this thesis, I have abandoned the system-approach to ethics, but kept the idea that changes in ethical convictions can be a valuable part of our efforts towards environmental solutions. I have abandoned the question of how we can *justify* environmental values, and substituted the question of how we can *work towards* environmental values. Without foundationalism, attaining an environmental ethic becomes a

matter of breadth rather than depth, and of thickness rather than thinness. Abandoning the search for foundations lets us accept that we can work towards practical solutions *without* a unanimous platform of universal validity on which to ground these efforts. It lets us avoid the stagnation which appears when we require the premises to be unconditional and uncontested. If we agree on what practical changes we are working towards, we can replace the question of whether we *really* should work towards it, and on what grounds, with the question of *how* we should work towards it.

The Rortyan picture of moral progress is one of wider sympathies and extension of loyalties being promoted by detailed and contextual “thick” descriptions of the suffering of new groups. Ethical change does not depend on increased moral knowledge, but rather on our ability to sympathize with new groups of beings. Since this kind of change is an open-ended process, there are no fixed limitations as to what kinds of entities we might include in our moral communities. On this view, attaining an environmental ethic is a matter of extending our sensitivity to non-human beings, and of increasingly considering their non-humanity as morally irrelevant. Consequently, I have suggested that the kinds of literature we should look to for contributions to environmental moral progress are poetic, narrative and metaphoric rather than analytic, theoretical and argumentative. Callicott may be right that Aldo Leopold’s philosophical ideas can be given a more precise and theoretical description. However, the moral force and the potential to contribute to environmental moral progress lie in the *narrative* descriptions in Leopold’s works.

To abandon environmental foundationalism is also to abandon the picture of a stable and fixed ethic which guides our actions and practices. In this thesis, I have argued that the relation between our environmental convictions and our concrete practices is not an automatic process. Rather, I have described the *achievement* of our environmental ideals as *another* environmental challenge, distinct from that of attaining environmental moral progress. The challenge of *realizing*

environmental convictions is another task, and accordingly a matter of using other tools. This aspect of social change is largely overlooked by environmental foundationalists, and only lightly touched upon by Rorty. I have argued that descriptions by which the environmental challenge becomes a *hyperobject* in our public discourses – a problem that exceeds the limits of our practical grasp – are inefficient tools for the aim of achieving our ideals. Since the practical achievement of our environmental convictions is a common and public challenge, it is not a matter of metaphor or revolutionary science, but of *normal discourse*.

As normal discourse, the efficiency of our public discourse on the environment – the ability to transform common convictions into actual practice – depends on our ability to reach agreement upon *common* premises and conceptions. To the degree that the hyperobjective environment is a common conception of the public, it is seemingly one which does not instigate practical change. I have argued that within our current normal vocabularies, the grandeur and complexity of the environment has a paralysing rather than motivating effect. As such, it is an inefficient tool for the achievement of our common environmental ideals.

Attaining an environmental ethic is a gradual, long-sighted process of coming up with new descriptions by which we consider non-human nature as less morally different from ourselves. *Achieving* the convictions we already have, and those we attain along the way, is a matter of using descriptions which narrow the gap between ideals and practices. The tools which are useful for one of these aims are not necessarily useful for the other. The ecological narrations of Aldo Leopold, and perhaps even the critical writings of Timothy Morton, may be useful tools for the long-sighted moral and discursive process of including nonhuman nature in our moral communities. As such, they are tools that may, in the long run, help us to grasp and cope with descriptions of the complexity and grandeur of the environment. As tools, they aim at creating future vocabularies in which such descriptions would be useful for our purpose of sustaining nature.

I have argued, however, that we do not currently respond very well to such descriptions. They are not useful in our current public vocabularies. Our ability to act out our increasing environmental ideals through concrete practical changes appears to be hindered by the ways in which we describe the challenge at hand. I have argued, therefore, that our public discourse on the environment could be more efficient if we toned down the hyperobjective descriptions, and substituted descriptions which are more local and practical. If we abandon foundationalism, we no longer need to choose our descriptions according to the degree of correspondence to reality. Instead, we can choose our descriptions according to their efficiency as tools for a particular aim. By construing the environmental crisis as a range of pressing, yet *solvable* practical problems which concern our local communities, we can create ways of talking which narrow the gap between our environmental ideals and their practical realization.

In this thesis, I have suggested an alternative way of approaching environmental ethics and vocabularies. The approach to our environmental vocabularies as tools with practical purposes is an attempt to change the focus from justification to consequences, and from theory to practice. Foundationalist philosophy is the attempt to talk about our vocabularies with reference to something on the outside. Although the reference to an outside has become obsolete, the need to talk about our vocabularies has not. Ironist literary criticism is a matter of talking about our vocabularies with reference to the practical purposes they are intended to promote.

Accordingly, the suggestions put forward in this thesis do not amount to a *solution* of the environmental crisis. I do not share the philosophical ambition to solve the environmental challenges by providing new values and worldviews. However, as an ironist literary critic, I have doubts about the whether the language of environmental foundationalism is a good way to promote environmental solutions. I also have doubts as to whether our predominant public descriptions of the environmental problem are useful for promoting practical

change. Therefore, I have suggested some other ways of talking about the environment, our values and ourselves, which could promote the emergence of more useful environmental vocabularies.

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